Four and Twenty Blackbirds

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Four and Twenty Blackbirds

by alivehawk1701

Summary

What if after Will was let out of the BSHCI Jack had found a different therapist for Will? This story is about Will's history of mental illness, his struggle with the loss of his reputation/marginal stability, his fractured relationships (especially with Hannibal) and his future in the FBI. How does anyone find themselves again after a tragic and traumatizing experience? Also Jack is still itching to find the Ripper, as per usual. And Hannibal only want the best for Will, right? It all starts when Winston falls ill and Hannibal is there to help save a life . . .

This story is finished, will be posting every other day or so. Also, alternating POVs which I will clearly mark as well as canon/series happenings changes as I go along.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Sickness

The phone rang distantly in my ear, seconds stretching into an eternity as I tried to catch my breath. My hand shook as I wrapped an arm around Winston. *Come on pick up* , I urged silenting, resting my chin on my dog's soft head, planting a kiss to the right of his ear. Winston knew I was upset, could hear the pounding of my heart and even though his eyes were closed he weakly licked my face with a dry, scaly tongue.

Finally an answer, "Hello?"

"Hannibal," I said, realizing it might have been the first time I'd called him Hannibal, not Dr. Lecter, in months.

"Will," there was the smallest of pauses, "I didn't expect to hear from you."

"Something is wrong with Winston," I said shakily, not interested in any good evenings or how are yous or why are you calling me of all peoples, "I called my vet and," I cleared my throat, anger rippling through me in a shivering wave, "He said I should find another vet, wouldn't even talk to me, just hung up the phone," whatever news article my longtime vet had read, sordid and sick tales detailing my grotesque crimes, apparently relieved him from his professional obligation to help a sick dog, especially when that dog is owned by an even formally suspected psycho killer.

"I-I don't know what to do," I'm sure he could hear the panic and fear in my voice. Panic that hadn't left me time to actually think about why I called him, yes of all people, beyond the fact that there was no one else. No one that would help me. My life in tatters, no discernible way to pick up the pieces, no coming back, no return to normal. The carefully constructed image of the harmless, loner professor in cozy jumpers and corduroy trousers had evaporated. Would I have to mourn the loss of that man? Would I, if I could? Could I recreate him?

"What are his symptoms?" Hannibal asked. No hesitation. His voice sounded so steady. Reassuring. My mind traveled back to that kitchen, a lifetime ago, Abigail's lifetime ago, when Hannibal's hands calmly replaced mine over her neck, his impossible tranquility nullifying my agnosized terror as blood pooled wet and warm around my knees.

"Uh," I looked down at Winston. We were on my bed, he'd not moved from where I'd left him this morning as I left for work. My first day back. No classes to teach. Easing myself in, they'd said. Which meant sitting alone in the office and shuffling around lesson plans, a return to apparent normalcy, feeling utterly alone. When I got home I'd let the dogs out and was surprised to not see Winston. He was usually the first to greet me. I'd found him on the bed, sleeping, barely acknowledging my presence, curled into a ball.

I gathered Winson in my arms and held him in my lap, heart sinking at the stiff dead weight of his usually lively body, "He hasn't eaten anything in thirty-six hours, or drank anything, he hasn't even moved from the bed. Extremely lethargic and his eyes are dark, like, uh, I-I don't know, he's just not himself, at all."

I heard Hannibal inhale deeply, “No sign of injury on his body? No bites or blood?”

“I don’t think so,” I shifted so I could run my hands over his body, over his limp legs, stretching out my empathic skill, searching for any response from him, to tell me where it hurt, “I don’t know,” he was curled in such a tight ball, how could I tell? I couldn’t sense him. It felt like he was already dead. The tiniest spark of life, somewhere deep, fluttering against a dark wind, touched my awareness, settling as a deep pain in my own chest and a desperate desire to gather it to me, keep it from going out, “Hannibal, I can’t lose him,”

“Keep him comfortable,” he said, “I will be right over.”

My eyes shot open, “What?”

“I am by no means a veterinarian but I believe I can help.”

Somehow, in the sick comic tragedy of my life, the only person I could call, the only person I knew who would help me and not consider arming themselves before coming into my home, was the man that had torn from me any semblance of a constructed reality, the man that despite all I knew about him, that which he’d allowed me to see, was reassuringly and inexplicably calm in impossible situations, “Ok,” I said after a moment and hung up.

Winston groaned and shifted himself clumsily, legs seeming uncooperative, back into the corner of the bed, laying his head on his front legs and curling his tail around himself. I watched him for a few moments, tears hot in my eyes, then got up. A chill blew through the room and I realized the front door was still open. I walked shakily across the house, not wanting to leave him, shutting it loudly, then looked down at my boots that had trailed muddy slush through my house. Shit. Scratching from outside the door. Fuck, the other dogs. I threw the door open and immediately Buster came scampering in, tail wagging. I whistled loudly, searching the dark for the others. I suddenly wanted them all near me.

They all found their way back inside and I closed the door. Locked it. Thought a moment. Unlocked it. Okay. Water. Maybe Winston will drink if I bring him something. Maybe he was just too weak to go to his bowl. I had to try.

I went to the kitchen and felt the dogs rubbing themselves on my legs asking for food as I filled a small bowl with water. Zoe, fond of stepping on my feet and winding in between my legs, almost tripped me, making me hiss and realize I was rushing, unfocused.

“You have to wait,” I told them in the calmest voice I could muster, “Winston first, guys.”
I rushed back to my room and sat on the bed. The water in the bowl sloshed onto the sheets before I placed it next to Winston’s nose. The other dogs followed me into the room. Buster jumped up on the bed. He sniffed at the water and I pushed him away. The others whined at the tension in the room, settling onto shaking haunches, watching me with pained patience.

“Winston,” I said, pushing the bowl closer, “Hey,” I pushed the bowl close enough to dip his nose in it, making him sniff at least, the tiniest of reactions, water wetting his paws, “Come on, just lick,” he did nothing, lips curling up for a moment to reveal pale gums, but left his head down, eyes closed. He had to try. *You at least have to try* , I begged silently. I lifted his

head, which made his eyes open, trying to get him to slip his tongue from his lips but he wouldn't.

"Drink," I commanded, watching water coat his snout, "Drink," I said louder, in frustration and pain, "Try! Come one, try, god," I grabbed onto the fur on his back, the thick ruff around his neck and pulled, almost shaking him, refusing to believe he would just lie there and let himself die.

"Don't," I sobbed before burying my face in his fur.

I don't know how long I laid there, listening to his heart and the slow in and out of his breath before the sudden tingling of a leg gone numb forced me to shift. Buster had come to lay next to Winston and the other dogs were at my feet. The tears that hadn't soaked into Winston's fur were dry on my cheeks as I sat up.

"Okay," I said to myself, wiping at my nose, "Okay," I needlessly pulled a blanket up over Winston, tucking it around his shoulders and stood up, "Okay, guys, I'll feed you."

I felt weak walking to the kitchen. Though I'd been free of the encephalitis, fever, for months, the time in hospital was not restorative. Freedom from hallucinations and waking dreams didn't leave me empowered, didn't fill me with confidence. Clearing, as Chilton had called it, after acute psychosis was a jarring experience. Suddenly realizing, through cogent thought, that what you were thinking and feeling wasn't real, is utterly terrifying. Now, cemented in reality, everything has lost it's vibrance, it's heavy and dark and shallow. Then you look in the mirror and wonder who's looking back at you. How did he find his way back and worse, where was that other person. Where did they go? And this isn't the first time I've had to go through it. Doctors assured me of a return to self. Like that was a static thing.

I took a deep breath, reaching in the fridge for the dog's food, gathering all those thoughts and feelings together in a tight ball and shoving them far behind a door in my mind. It was the only way I could cope right now. A fast, dirty, white knuckling kind of coping. It never ceased to amaze me just how much I could fit behind there and just how well adapted I was to the constant sound of creaking hinges and hollow knocking.

I scooped the food into several bowls and set them on the ground before seeing headlights shining through the front windows. That was fast. Maybe I'd drifted off with Winston, I thought, the twinge of fear that I could be losing time again, losing myself, caused my heart to clench with uncertainty. Tried to assure myself that everything was okay. Closed my eyes and silently did what Hannibal had told me, said my name, where I was, and when. Of course it was in his voice.

A knock sounded lightly on the door.

"It's open," I called, setting down the other dog's water. From the doorway of the kitchen I watched Hannibal open the door and walk through. Several of the dogs abandoned eating to go say hello to him. I remained at the doorway to the kitchen, taking the time to readjust to the particular empathic presence I felt from him. It felt like warm, kinetic velvet and cool still graniet. There was a pulse to it, a humming; for most people it only came from the eyes, with

him it came from his whole body. It felt so easy to slide back into that energy that I was sure that if he'd had a melody stuck in his head I could have heard it.

"Good evening, Will," he was carrying what looked like a medical bag, which he set down to take off his coat. No suit. Cashmere the colour of red wine and grey trousers.

"Thanks for coming," I said stiffly, as I filled dirty dog dishes with water to soak, watching as Hannibal knelt down to scratch behind Max's ears. They knew him well enough. If he really was a monster they'd sense it, I thought, wouldn't they?

He stood, removing his shoes, an oddly human, domestic gesture and said, "I'd ask how your first day back was but insist on seeing my patient first," a small smile. Was this easy for him? I didn't want to focus on him anymore than I had to to find out. There was danger there. Danger and something else.

"This way," I said, leading Hannibal to my bedroom.

His bag in hand Hannibal followed me, ducking slightly into the room and sat softly on the bed next to me and Winston.

"I tried getting him to drink something," I said, "He wouldn't."

He hummed in understanding, his eyes briefly brushing over mine, then looked to Winston, "Winston," he called, reaching out to pull back the blanket. He touched Winston's back, scooting himself up on the bed, long legs stretching out as he rested on his elbows, lifting Winston's face in his hands. Winston had made no response to him being there, not even a tail wag, and seemed locked in stone as Hannibal looked into his eyes and pulled back his lips and peered curiously into his ears. I said nothing, breath caught somewhere high in my chest as Hannibal ran his long fingered hands over Winston's fur and spoke in low tones under his breath. The gentle, patient movements somehow allowed him to uncurl Winston enough to check his belly.

"No obvious injury," Hannibal said then leaned his head down and closed his eyes. I watched him inhale deeply, the breath expanding his chest, letting it out as his eyelashes fluttered, "Does he smell wrong to you?"

I moved my feet from the floor to be closer to Winston, as Hannibal was, and smelled, "Yeh, a little," the realization was alarming and I felt tears again in my eyes, throat clenching. *I shouldn't have been gone so long* , I settled my forehead against Winstons, *I'm so sorry* . We were close enough that I could feel the air stir around me as Hannibal smelled again and sat up, "I'm sorry Will, it's his liver."

"His liver? Like liver disease?"

"No," Hannibal's head tilted in thought, "A toxin. His liver is working very hard to filter something out. I don't know what."
"What do we do?"

He scooted from the bed and reached for his bag, “I brought something we can use to get water into him. It’s a small baster I usually use for roasted meat but it should do the trick. Also administering a small dose of milk thistle tincture will aid his liver in it’s duties.”

“You have milk thistle?”

“I brought a variety of natural remedies in order to cover a wide range of ailments,” he paused to reach and stroke Winston’s head, “I also brought some chicken and rice. I know you make your own dog food but the blandness of this dish will help clear his system.”

I blinked, disbelief tightening my jaw, “Chicken.”

Hannibal met my eyes in earnest for the first time, pausing at the dubious tone in my voice as a pink flash of tongue wet his lower lip before saying, “Actual chicken, Will.”

I searched his eyes. The tendrils of my awareness reached out, further into him than I’d wanted to risk, and was at least marginally assured he hadn’t brought human meat for Winston. Though I only meant it to be a brief moment of connection I felt a sudden hot thread of emotion course through him. Felt his heart clench in my own chest. It flashed hot for a moment before his eyes lowered, “I can cook it here, if that’s alright, it won’t take long.”

“Yeh,” I breathed, steadying myself, “Sure,” then, “So he got into something? Something poison?”

“It may actually be the best case scenario versus actual liver disease. Short of very expensive diagnostic tests followed by limited options for effective treatment there is a little an actual veterinarian could do for a dying liver. We can hope that his body, with our help, will rally against the toxin.”

“I should have been here.”

“There’s nothing you could have done to prevent it.”

“These things just happen?”

“They do. And with six dogs the likelihood of it happening to you only increases.”

“Well that makes me feel much better,” I snapped then, watching his eyes shift away, sighed and conceded, if reluctantly, “I know six is a lot, I know,” I rubbed at an aching temple.

“Your compassion for wayward creatures is not a character flaw,” Hannibal said, meeting my eyes over Winston’s head, “Quite the opposite.”

I was surprised when a small smile spread over my lips, eliciting the same in Hannibal, “You’re covered in fur,” I said, breaking eye contact to look down at the various colours of fur stuck to his grey trousers.

His eyebrows rose and he sat up, somehow resisting the obvious urge to brush it away, “A risk I was willing to take.”

I stepped off the bed, rubbing the back of my neck, body tense and tired from emotion. His and mine. Hannibal seemed to take the cue and pulled the aforementioned baster from his bag along with a small glass bottle, “Can you get some fresh water please? Let’s see if we can’t get some fluids into him.”

I got up to go to the kitchen and filled a glass of water. Maybe Winston would be okay. Maybe this would work. Maybe. I felt a hesitant hope settle in my chest and I cautiously breathed a sigh of relief. I’d found Winston right when I’d gotten back into the field. He’d been there with me through the worst of it. The connection we’d established, in just a small amount of time, was unlike any I’d felt with an animal since I was a kid. A distant, locked away memory of soft brown eyes sliding shut emerged from a dark corner of my mind and I pushed it back. I needed Winston to make it.

I hurried back to the bedroom and handed the water to Hannibal. He dipped the baster in the water and filled the tube. With the same quiet gentle movements he pulled Winson closer to him so his head rested on his thigh then placed the tip of the baster at the corner of WInston’s mouth and released a small amount of water. Winston barely responded, tongue twitching a small amount, eyes still closed. Hannibal let more water out into his mouth and I watched as slowly and carefully Winston managed to drink three of them.

“Thank god,” I kissed the top of Winston’s head, “Good job, buddy. Good work,” I closed my eyes, listening again to the sound of his breathing, imagining even the small amount of water replenishing every cell, giving him a chance, giving him the choice to carry on.

“Every few hours you should try to give him water,” Hannibal reached for the small glass bottle and quickly, with ease and precision, squeezed the tincture into Winston’s mouth, “Voila,” Hannibal said, screwing the cap back on the bottle, “This should be given every day for next three days or until he improves,” Hannibal stood after tucking the blanket back around Winston and patting his back. “Shall we move on to the culinary portion of the evening?”

I nodded and we went to the kitchen. I offered Hannibal a few different pots and he chose two before reaching back into his bag to pull out several plastic containers. In one were two raw chicken breasts, which he put in one pot, and white rice, which he set on the counter.

I watched as he carefully rolled up the sleeves, exposing the pale scars on his forearms, and filled the pot with the chicken in it with water. He then set it on the stove and turned on the burner, glancing quickly at his watch then, somehow intuiting where measuring cups were, measured out two cups of rice. He did this all without a word but shifted his eyes to me, probably feeling my eyes on him.

“I sense many questions on the tip of your tongue, Will,” he said as he poured water in the other pot.

I shifted, crossing my arms in front of myself, “You’re not wrong.”

“Questions about me?”

“That’s a shocking amount of self preoccupation.”

“You are wondering why you called me.”

“Well, my social circle wasn’t exactly vast *before* everyone thought I was insane.”

“Faced with such darkness very few would feel comfortable standing before it.”
“Except for you.”

“I will always come when you need me, Will,” he said, turning from the stove and reaching for a wooden spoon, “You must never question that.”

“I don’t question that,” I said, feeling shaky and raw with emotion, finding it easier to speak to him with his back turned, “What I question is how healthy it is for me to have you back in my life. There is still so much that is . . . unclear,” the word, far too subtle for the actual experience, caused memories of latex gloves against my face, of gaging, of a light and a needle and a dizzying descent further and further away from myself, “I’m still not entirely sure what happened. What you did.”

“You regret calling me then.”

“I needed your help. Winston needed your help,” I felt frightened. Small. Divided. Alone, “But how can I distinguish between help and manipulation?”

“I’ve never manipulated. Guided, perhaps.”

“And what makes you so sure you know where to guide me.”

Hannibal poured the rice into the boiling water and turned down the heat before replacing the lid and turned to face me, “It’s obvious you’re still angry with me.”

“Yeh,” I scoffed.

“Because of Abigail.”

“Yes,” golden pre-dusk light on water, a memory that didn’t exist, Abigail smiling as the line arced over our heads.

“I am sorry about Abigail. It is difficult to see the purpose in such loss when the pain is still so great.”

“There was no purpose to her death,” I spat.

“There could be.”

Hannibal rarely emoted openly. The fine tendrils of my cautious awareness of him reacted to a subtle change in his stance, a darkening of his eyes, his energy shifting just enough for me to wonder and ask, “I can’t decide if you’re just saying what I want to hear or you really are that optimistic.”

Hannibal considered this for a moment, bracing his arms to either side of him on the counter, “The wolves are always at the door, Will.”

A typical vague answer. A vague metaphor working in tandem with his infuriating calm. I felt a wave of fatigue hit me as I settled back on the counter across from him, feeling my shoulders relax with a deep sigh. I was willing to admit, at least in this moment, that I knew why I'd called him. And so did he.

"Before all of this happened my sanity was something I could question in private," I said, feeling like the words were echoing from across a great distance, "I had anonymity. I was comfortable here. Finally. Do you know what it's like to walk into a grocery store, as an empath, accused of multiple cannibalistic murders? Even if you are acquitted? It's suffocating," I looked up at him, "Imagine that happening to you," I said sharply, "What would you do?"
Hannibal's unwavering eye contact eliminated the echo from the room as he said steadily and with a licking intrigue, "I'd run with the wolves."

One of the dogs whined and butted my hand with his head, looking up at the stove. He wanted the chicken which was near done cooking.

"Out of the kitchen," I told Max, the tensile connection snapping loose between us, "This is for Winston," Max turned and padded back to the living room with a soft whine.

"Where do you keep your forks?" Hannibal asked, returning to the task at hand and to the stove to stir the rice.

"Here," I stepped over to a drawer to his left and extracted a fork, turning to hand it to him. Proximity didn't help. The pad of his index finger brushed over mine as I passed him the utensil, making my throat tighten, "Knives are--" I took a step backward, pointing at the knife block.

"Thank you," Hannibal said, turning to set out a cutting board with the knife and fork. I hung back at the other side of the kitchen.

"So, how *was* your first day back?" Hannibal asked casually.

"Not great," I said honestly, as usual following the now expected twists and turns in our conversations, the scraps of unspoken words stuck between my teeth, "I get the feeling that my days are numbered there. Like my inevitable termination will hinge on something nonconsequential like leaving my copies on the machine or putting a coffee pot back empty on the burner."

"There are other teaching positions."

"Outside the FBI."

"Outside the FBI, yes. You are a gifted teacher."

"It was the solution to my inadequacies in the field."

"Give yourself a moment to breathe," he had taken the cooked chicken out of the pot and was dicing it quickly into small pieces, "A moment to readjust your narrative from who you

strove to be to the truths that circumstances have given shape to."

"I thought we would wait at least a week to start therapy again, Hannibal."

"Is that what you want?"

His hands had paused over the cutting board, the knife lowering as the words slipped from my lips as if from a clenched fist, "I want to stop being afraid."

His voice seemed almost small in response, and as always it was an offer, not a demand, as he faced me in profile, "I can help you be less afraid."

"Can you?" I asked, the image of a noose around his neck and blood running down his legs suddenly flashed in my mind. Had he been afraid? What did he feel when he saw his scars? Did he think of me?

"Yes," he turned to face me.

I let a few pulsing moments pass, anger and confusion tightening my throat, "Convince me."

His eyes fluttered somewhat, dropping to the floor briefly, "Institutionalization can be extremely traumatizing, especially to those having difficulty determining reality from dream, those who are not comfortable in their own body and mind. I've worked extensively with those who--"

"No. We're not in therapy yet, Hannibal. Tell me why you think *you* can help me."

"I often work outside the typical framework of psychiatry," he inhaled, "You do not fit into the typical framework. Nor should you," he hesitated, muscles tense in his jaw as he clenched his teeth, words coiled in anticipation, "And to me, you are beautiful."

The air stood still, his heartbeat loud in my ears, darkness creeping into the corner of my vision so all that was illuminated were his eyes locked to mine.

The dogs suddenly ran for the door, followed shortly by the sound of car tires on gravel.

Hannibal, not breaking eye contact, asked, "Are you expecting anyone?"

"No."

He tilted his head slightly to the door, "It's Jack."

"Jack?" heart kicked into a faster rhythm and I looked away from Hannibal, letting him finish the chicken and rice, not knowing how to process what he said and not willing to ask him more, not now, not when everything else that had happened tonight was too much already, "Little late for a social call."

I strode through the dogs and to the front door and swung it open to see Jack stepping up the porch steps.

“Jack,” I said, wrapping my arms around myself, letting the dogs wander to their tree. It was late enough they would be wanting to go to bed soon.

“Will, sorry to stop by unexpectedly.”

“In the neighborhood?”

“Sort of,” he stepped up to me, rubbing his hands together in the brisk air, “Also curious how you were doing.”

“Fine,” I said, back against the doorframe, “Fine,” my eyes went to Hannibals car in the driveway.

“Someone here?” Jack asked.

“Yeh,” I said, clearing my throat, “Winston is sick. H-Hannibal came over to help,” I bulked at my stutter, blaming the stressful night and the intensity apparently inherent in cooking chicken and rice with Hannibal Lecter.

“Hannibal,” Jack cast his eyes to the slightly fogged windows, “I see.”

“What did you need, Jack?” I redirected.

“I needed to speak with you. About returning to work.”

“I’ve already returned to work.”

“A contingency in order to continue to work.”

“Ok. What?”

“Can we step inside?”

Paused. Didn’t want him to see Hannibal and I together. Didn’t want to explain to him what I could barely explain to myself. But didn’t want a confrontation so said, “Fine.”

Jack followed me inside, standing in the square of light from the kitchen, his eyes following it to Hannibal standing in the distance. Hannibal, finishing up with his work said with ease, “Jack, good to see you.”

“Hannibal.” Jack answered, a quick glance to me then back to Hannibal. Curiosity mixed with a fair amount of aggression boiled up in him, expertly kept just under the surface with the appropriate amount of weight and fortitude, “Branching out into veterinarian work?”

“Helping a friend,” Hannibal answered.

“Winston ok?”

“He hopefully will be.”

“You were talking about work, Jack,” I interjected from my awkward place in the center of the living room. Why did he have to come inside? This was my space.

“I was,” he paused, looking at Hannibal again. If he had fur it would have raised in a threatening display around his neck, “Could we speak in private, Will?”

“I will go check on Winston,” Hannibal said amiably, tossing a towel on the counter.

Once he was gone, not bothering to take off his coat or hat, Jack refocused his attention to me, eyes heavy and unyielding. Even regretful, I noted with a gulp of understanding, “Will, we want you back at work but we also want to be confident we are doing all we can for you.”

“Like fast PTO accumulation?” I quipped, responding to his detached “we” pronoun with disdain.

“Therapy.”

“I’m planning to continue therapy.”

“Not with Hannibal Lecter you’re not,” his answer came quickly with stone-like finality.

“Who decided this?”

“Do I really need to spell it out for you?”

“Please do, I’ve been a little foggy on details lately.”

“You and Hanibal are too entrenched. He factored heavily into your delusion and would be an incredibly poor choice for a therapist.”

“Someone else qualified to do it?” we’d been here before. I’d questioned the efficacy of therapy, particularly on me, and questioned Jack’s involvement in my apparently well known struggles with mental health.

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“His name is Dr. Gachet”

“I don’t need another therapist.”

“You do if you want to stay in the FBI. Mandatory ten sessions before reevaluation.”

“And if I say no?”

“Then consider today your first and last day back.” paused, “Will, this shouldn’t be a hard choice. What you've been through would destroy any other man. Give this a chance. Give him a chance. Hannibal Lecter is *not* an option any longer.”

I would have said something but felt the words die in my throat under the unyielding bulk of his conviction. If I wanted to believe it I could believe he cared about my wellbeing. It just didn't feel like it. Not when he questioned everything I did.

"Your first appointment is tomorrow. He'll meet you at Quantico. One oclock," he waited for me to nod then his face softened slightly, his shouldering energy depleting, "I hope you can understand, Will," he said, "What's important here is you finding your footing so that if you want to go out into the field again it would be an option for you. But for now; just take it one day at a time."

"Is that what you're doing, Jack?" I asked as he reached for the doorknob.

"Everyday things get clearer and clearer," he said, stepping outside the door, "Goodnight, WIll."

I stood out on the porch and watched him leave, goosebumps rising in a tide up my back and over my shoulders, down my arms. I didn't like being told what to do. Didn't like feeling trapped. I'd been locked up for months. Freedom is something you never take for granted once it's been taken away from you.

Interuption

Chapter Notes

A short chapter, so decided to post. This is from Hannibal's POV, will be a bit of a switch every chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Winston's tail twitched at my presence. The bare minimum of improvement, in truth, but he was young and strong and recovery would take time. He very well may rally against the toxin and forget the whole ordeal within days. The luxury of a simple brain built to focus on basic needs, basic bonds, and little else. I sat lightly on the bed, the sound of Will and Jack's voices distant from the front of the house, stroking Winston's fur.

"Uncle Jack's suspicion grows everyday," I said to Winston, "But he is a patient hunter. He won't expend any undue energy without assurity of capture," I strained my ears, their tones too low to make out, "He does care for Will. But he cares about the Ripper more," Winston sighed. I could smell when Jack was hunting. His body odor became particularly acrid when he felt he was close to something. But I lacked Will's ability to truly understand his motives. I could intuit theories relating to his ailing wife and career fatigue, even guilt at failing a potential son figure, but my intentions weren't to analyze Jack Crawford. I needed to keep him close and most of all comfortable, especially when Will had made the accusations he had and the FBI now had record of my fingerprints and DNA.

Unfortunate that Jack had showed up here unexpectedly. If not deep sincere concern he was certainly protective of Will. Of course he was surprised I was here. I had been surprised myself to hear from Will. But pleased he would think of me when in trouble. Happy to have the opportunity to properly animate parts of myself that have atrophied from years of disuse. Since meeting Will I'd pulled back the heavy drapes, allowed light to spill into abandoned rooms, clearing the dust and bitterness of years spent alone. And in all those months spent peering at him through bars, his brain clearing from encephalitis in creeping cautious steps, he was far from interested in warmth and friendship and more in understanding the monster he'd glimpsed.

"I can be patient," I said aloud to Winston, "I admire his teeth and claws. Let him bite."

I sat with Winston for a moment more. The smallest dog, who had been keeping a watchful eye, jumped onto the bed next to me and flopped onto my lap. I let my eyebrows furrow slightly at the now white fur on my trousers. Dogs did not ask for consent. They assumed they were wanted. I petted the small one regardless. They were part of Will. His pack. They respected and understood his dominance. They needed him.

The voices stopped and I heard the door open. When it didn't close immediately I scented the air, noting Jack was gone but the door was open. I dislodged the small dog and stood up, brushing the hair from my trousers. Walked to the front to see Will standing outside in only his tshirt.

"Will?" I asked from the doorway, seeing the dogs running in the dark, "Will?" I repeated. When he didn't respond I put a tentative hand on his shoulder. He jerked back to awareness with a gasp, spinning on his heels to face me with wide blinking eyes as a hand went to my forearm to steady himself.

"Yeh?" his hand tightened then let go of my arm, "Yeh, sorry, got lost in thought," he raised his shoulders against the cold.

"Jack left in a hurry"

He shook his head as he looked out to the yard and the dogs, drawing in a deep breath that he let out as a shuddering sigh. The hairs on his arms were standing up and his nipples were visible through the thin fabric of his shirt, "He played the part of the reluctant messenger. Left stage right in wait for his applause."

"Come inside," I said, noting the smell of snow on the air.

"He said I'm not allowed to go back to therapy with you," Will said, shivers starting across his shoulders, his breath shaking either with anger or the cold.

I stepped forward so he could feel the warmth of my body and raised my hand again to his arm, "The FBI will not allow it?"

"I don't know anymore. I don't know," he did not move away from my hand which was warm against his cold skin, "He has some therapist I have to see tomorrow *or else* ," he laughed, "After which I'll be reevaluated."

"Did he say the doctor's name?"

"Dr. Gachey? Gachet?" his eyes finally lifted up to mine and I couldn't help but run my hand gently up and down his arm.

"I don't believe I've heard of him," I said, searching my memory.

"I guess I was right all along," Will said, dark circles showing under his eyes, "I'd be crazy to go back into therapy with you. Too crazy for the FBI."

"Will," I said gently, "Regardless of what the FBI orders you to do for therapy I won't stop being your friend."

"I don't want to do it," he said quietly, "I don't want to talk to anyone," he sniffed and his teeth chattered.

"Come," I said, sliding my hand around to his back to guide him back inside, "A fair night's sleep will give new light to the issue in the morning."

He nodded and stepped forward, turning his head to whistle at the dogs who came running. I dropped my hand from his back and closed the door after the dogs had made their way inside.

“Go to Winston,” I said, “I will clean up the kitchen and check on you both in a moment.”

Will walked heavily to his room and I made quick work of the dishes, packed up the chicken and rice, put it in the fridge, and turned out the lights. When I went back to his room I found him sitting on the edge of his bed with his dog, having tugged off his trousers and socks in a pile on the floor, appearing exhausted.

I lingered in the doorway, sensing the echoing distance of his current state of mind, “Do you need something to help you sleep?” I asked.

“No, thank you,” he looked up at me, “I’m sorry, thanks for coming over and cooking,” his words came to me strained and heavy, as if they took great effort, “But I want to be alone.”

“Of course,” I acknowledged. I wanted to put a blanket over him. Wanted to lie on the bed with him and stop his shivering. I surprised myself at the intensity of these thoughts, these desires, to protect him, steady him, to be close to him, “I’ve left the baster and the tincture on the kitchen counter. You should give him a little more to drink before you go to sleep, or if he is up to it, try and feed him, at least a little. Call me in the morning to let me know how he is. I feel confident he will make a full recovery.”

Will nodded again and I left, pulling his front door closed behind me into the dark cool air with a sense that I’d both left something behind and that I’d made a mistake. Said too much. His vulnerability, true vulnerability after the ordeal of returning to a life that now felt alien and unsafe to him, was settling somewhere deep within those neglected rooms in my mind. I drove back home with my windows rolled down, wondering what the FBI would do to him and how closely I could maintain my closeness to him as well as my closeness to their pursuit of the Ripper. But most intensely I wondered about Dr. Gachet. I didn’t know him. But I would.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks all that read chapter one and commented. Also forgot to mention, gold star for anyone who noticed that I stole the name Dr. Gachet from histroy. He was Van Gogh's doctor. And yes I have feeling about him, poisoning poor Vincent thought indeed that was considered treatment at the time. I may or may not have read three or four books on Vincent during lockdown. And anyone who wants to fight me can but Gauguin was a selfish, senseless, wretchedly awful person especially to Vincent and I find it difficult to enjoy his art. Anyway, hope you enjoyed, cheers!

In Session

Chapter Notes

> Will's POV. Also the divergence from canon in this chapter is that not Beverly, but Price was killed. This was done for a few reasons, first of which is in my estimation Price's loss would affect the team in a different way (Price and Zeller were so close) and because quite simply, I missed Bev and loved her and Will together.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I'm being chased. Or chasing someone. Somehow it's not clear. Not clear where I am. Not clear what happened just before. Fear bleeds into exhilaration and is indistinguishable. Sharp snap of twigs and branches under my bare feet as I run through a tangle of branches. It's dark in the way a room is jet black right after you flip off a light. Those terrifying seconds that choke you with fear as you wait for your pupils to dilate. I trip and fall onto moist leaves and mud. I inhale dirt with my ragged breaths and feel my feet tangled in roots. I realize I'm naked and the mud caked over my skin is mixed with blood. My head swivels back as my eyes finally adjust and see it standing beside a tree in a swath of silver moonlight. Thin black limbs stretch like the trees themselves across my vision and it's antlers scrape the starry sky. Rolled forward, kicking my foot free and slipped on the leaves and fell to my back. It's suddenly standing over me, the moon behind it's back. There is only the glint of wetness as it bares its teeth.

My eyes snapped open in the dark. Squinted to draw into focus the glowing red numbers of my bedside clock that read 4:33. Awareness came back to me as first the headache that had never left, thundering between both temples, then the low level noxious panic rising from the pit of my stomach. No reprieve. No peace. Started right when I opened my eyes like crows to fresh roadkill. I shifted in bed, neck stiff from where I'd fallen asleep in the wrong position and found Winston still lying next to me. Fear twisted in my gut and I stretched my awareness out to him, frantically praying he wasn't dead. I first felt his warmth then heard the quiet sigh he let out at my wakefulness. Thank god. I rolled to my side and rested my head on his shoulder against the quiet rise and fall of his breathing and steady beat of his heart.

"Made it," I breathed into his fur, "How are you feeling?" Winston lifted his head and sought to lick my face, "Better?" I wrapped my arm around him and felt like I could cry from relief, "Want to try some more water? Something to eat?"

I clumsily rose from bed, the floor cold under my feet as I padded to the kitchen. The dogs were for the most part still asleep but the thumping of tails indicated their awareness. I shushed them back to sleep as I retrieved the supplies Hannibal had left and poured a glass of water. My thoughts shifted to work and I fought the urge to crawl back into bed and disappear. I didn't want to face the day, the reality, the effort it would take to just be around people, to play the part, smile and chat over stale pastries about television or car troubles. Not

that I did that before, to be fair, so much easier to act like I didn't hear someone or that I was running late somewhere and make a hurried exit. But now even the idea of socializing felt less like a nuisance and more like broken glass. I doubt any of the break-roomers wanted to hear about the odd smell of my cell when it rained outside, damp leaking from somewhere behind the bricks, or the god awful whistling of the morning guard that sounded somewhere between Iggy Pop and Sinatra.

There was a very small part of my mind that I was willing to occupy at the moment. The rest was too terrifying. What it was capable of, the darkness that came so naturally, so much more easily than the banal dream of normalcy, shadowed every thought, made me doubt every mental path. I wanted to extract those parts of myself, the violent, sick parts that lied deep and contented in the center. Don't excite it. Don't wake it. Let it sleep.

And I felt regret. Regret calling Hannibal last night. I'd wanted him here. Maybe because he didn't see me that way. Apparently he saw me very differently than other people. Or even than myself. I desperately wanted to hate him. But all I really knew for sure was that I never, ever wanted to be manipulated, or guided, by him ever again. Whatever reasons he had for what he did to me were twisted and wrong. But they did make a few things very clear. I'm not like everyone else. And neither is he. Which was as far as I was willing, able to go right now. I especially didn't have the mental energy to understand what he'd meant last night, what he wanted from me, after all he'd taken. Didn't want to trace the thread back to all the times he didn't actually say it but I'd felt it. Rejected it. Denied it. But as I scooped some chicken and rice into a bowl I had to admit, for my own sake, that he was the only person that it didn't hurt to be around.

For as long as I can remember I've felt different. Wrong. Deep within the anaerobic confines of my mind something festered. Rotted. Adaptation wasn't rising above the fray, ascending to a place of tranquility, it was knitting together ragged pieces of flesh, like a wound left to heal in whatever way it can, guessing at the right way to do it. All I'd wanted was to be beige. Unnoticeable. Blend in. Well not anymore.

I returned to Winston and first gave him water. I tried to do it the way Hannibal had done it, speaking quietly and calmly, at his own pace. Winston responded better, even protested the intrusion but allowed me to give him four basters full of water. I then put the bowl near his mouth and ran my hand over his head, "Hungry?" I asked, "I bet you are, come on," I watched his his nostrils widened, scenting the bland dish, "It's bare minimum, nothing special," I said, "Hannibal made it just for you," Winston sniffed then stuck out his tongue, jaw opening to allow a few pieces of rice to slide into his mouth, "Yeh?" I scooped up a small amount onto my fingers and guided them to his mouth, "That's it," he ate the clump of chicken and rice from my hand though the effort to just chew seemed to exhaust him. But he was hungry. I helped him eat a few more bites, almost to finish the bowl than gave him a few more basters of water.

"Let me get dressed, then we'll go outside, okay?" I stood and stretched out my arms, arching my back, hoping to somehow relieve the tension that played up and down my spine. A long walk in the woods sounded nice to me. Maybe later. I cast an eye to the east where the sky was finally lightening to a pale blue. Soon pink and orange. I rarely miss the sunrise these days. Sleep is not so restful for me. Otherwise I'd remain in bed to seek it out. I pulled on a

pair of trousers and put on a fresh shirt. Grabbed a grey knit jumper and pulled that on too, followed by thick brown socks.

“Alright, Winston, come on,” I wrapped the blanket around him and picked him up. He didn’t like it but was too weak to struggle. I walked to the front door, watching the other dogs stretch and yawn. Shoving my feet into boots I opened the door and took Winston down the steps to the grass, unwrapping him enough so that he wouldn’t soil the blanket, “Gotta go?” I asked, turning to see the other dogs holding back at the open door. They were worried too. Winston looked up at me with tired eyes but after a few moments of shakily standing he finally peed. Some light had returned to his eyes. I’d never been so happy to see him pee, standing on his own legs.

Afterwards, I wrapped the blanket back around him and brought him up to the porch to sit in the wicker chair. I held him in my lap and got comfortable, our bodies warming each other as the sun rose. The other dogs came and sniffed us, I assured them we were okay and they ran out into the yard.

Overhead a formation of geese marched across the sky. It was one of my favourite things about fall. The geese leaving. Somehow they sounded different leaving then they did coming in the spring. Winston had his head raised and was sniffing the air. This was peaceful. I could stay here forever.

“I don’t want to go to work,” I told him, “Wish I didn’t have to. Don’t want to see this doctor,” I looked down to his head that was now resting on my forearm, “I’m not sure where I belong anymore,” I said, fighting the sting of tears in my eyes. We sat like that until the sun rose all the way over the horizon and a tentative vail of calm settled over me.

Realizing the inevitability of the day I went back inside, put Winston in bed, and pushed on a brown jacket for work before heating up a several days old cup of coffee for the drive in.

My car jerked harshly into my parking spot. When I felt my foot on the break I unclasped my hands from the wheel, shocked to feel my nails coming loose, my white knuckles cramping loose. I don’t entirely remember driving here. Had been automatic. I pushed aside that concern and avoided my face in the rearview as I got out of the car.

In my office I settled at my desk. Glanced at my watch. Hours to go. Regardless of no class schedule I threw myself into reviewing my materials, for any good it would do if I never get to teach again, but it kept me busy.

A few hours later I heard a knock on my door, “Hey, welcome back!” Beverly stuck her head through the gap, “I heard tell of your return but wasn’t sure if it was just a rumour or what,” she pushed the door open all the way to lean against the doorframe. She was carrying two coffee cups.

“Hi, Beverly,” I set down my pen and saw I’d been doodling a pathetic looking deer. *Stag* , my mind corrected me, “I didn’t expect to see anyone, hi.”

“I’m the advanced scouting party, just so you know,” she must have noticed my cringe because she raised her hands in a pacifying gesture, “It’s just Zellar, not the Otoman Empire.

He didn't have the balls to come say hi just yet."

"It really isn't necessary," I said, tense at the probing curiosity she was directing at me. Bright, happy, effortless. How did she do it?

"Are you kidding, do you know how excited we were when we found out you hadn't done it?"

"I can only imagine you were--"

"Thrilled!"

"Right."

She noticed my eyes dropping to the coffee in her hands, "Here!" she bounced forward, "Got you--"

"Coffee."

"--latte," she set the cup down in front of me, frowning, "Did you--I thought I heard you say one time that you loved lattes."

"I love lattes," I tried smiling through gritted teeth. I didn't. And hadn't. Overpriced milk.

"Well, anyway, it's still hot."

"Thanks."

"Full class roster? Raring to go?"

"No," her desperate attempts at conversation were grating. She was more than aware it was awkward and I felt like a specimen under one of her microscopes as she rocked back on her heels, "No classes scheduled for the foreseeable future."

"Oh, well I'm sure tons of kids will be very excited to take a class from you."

"I'm not sure that's the word I'd use."

"The notorious Will Graham, come on."

"Notorious."

Her venier cracked slightly, given away by her eyes wandering to the side and a slight quiver of her lips, "I'm not sure that's the word *they'd* use."

"Probably not," I said shortly, taking a sip of the latte to be polite.

A few moments passed wherein I tried to look as if I was enjoying the feel of frothy milk thick my tongue, she bit her lip, and I prepared myself for the inevitable question I sensed at the tip of her tongue.

“So, how *are* you feeling?”

I ran the pad of my thumb over the condensation on the lip of the cup and inhaled deeply, “Like a frog in a rapidly boiling pot of water.”

“We’re just--I’m just,” she sighed as if annoyed with herself, “I wanted to let you know that there are no hard feelings. I get it, you were . . .” god here it comes, “ . . . sick,” I hated that word. Didn’t look at her, didn’t want to see the pitying look that somehow mixed so well with closely watching for any sign of crazy, “And framed,” she laughed stiffly then settled her hands on her belt, words somber again, “It’s a shitty thing that happened to you. We all should have fought harder to clear your name.”

“ *You* did,” I said, stopping her slightly frantic energy, “And I appreciate that.”

“You’d have done the same for me,” she said, downplaying her compassion, “But from now on, if you ever need to talk,” she met my eyes and though compassionate they were leary like seeing something beautiful but dangerous at the zoo. She couldn’t help it. Mental illness isn’t something that you can see, it’s not a rash or a wound, and that makes people nervous, not knowing who and when the levy cracks, “You can talk to me.”

Maybe she meant it. A fraction of it anyway. She was scared to know what that entailed. “Thanks, Bev,” I said, “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“You better,” she insisted, then sighed, “But I gotta go, make sure Zellar is still upright.”

It felt like an anvil, nearly taking my breath away, “I’m sorry,” swallowed through an increasing tightness in my throat, “It must be rough right now.”

“It is, not gonna lie,” her arms crossed, “Barely keeping ahead of the workload, with less people. And we miss him. A lot,” her eyes dropped to the floor for a moment, “Jack tried to send a student down to fill the space, help out, Zellar went ballistic,” a weak laugh, “Poor kid ran all the way back to Omaha, or wherever.”

“I wish I could help.”

“You will. Give it time.”

“Are you working on a case?”

“I’m sorry, Will,” her face dropped, “You know I can’t . . .”

I looked away, “Right, I know.”

“Just take care of yourself. You’ll be back. In the meantime I gotta make sure Zellar isn’t on his way to a liquid lunch.”

She left and I was able to breathe. Out of the many reasons I didn’t want to talk to anyone at work was because of Price. Of course I knew they wouldn’t stop working cases just because I wasn’t there. Because he wasn’t there. Work wouldn’t stop because Price had been killed. But

the feeling of absence was too great. Zellar was a mess and Beverely was doing her best to hold it all together.

I stood and paced the office. Maybe I'd go for a walk. Maybe I should take up smoking, just as an excuse to go outside and be left alone. I remembered sneaking one of my dad's cigarettes in the middle of the night when I was a teenager. Hidden behind the garage, shakily lighting a match, I enjoyed the quiet thrill of rebellion. My head pulsed with nicotine as I hugged my knees and stared up into the night sky. I'd stayed outside long after I'd finished the cigarette, limbs still tingling, not wanting to sleep. That's when the nightmares had started. Dirt still caked under my nails from the hole I'd dug for my first dog, mom gone, dad working too much, never around. We'd lose that house. Never have one again.

I barely sit down again before there is another knock on the door.

"You neglected to call me this morning with an update on Winston's condition."

Looked up to see Hannibal in the door of my office wearing what was for him a subdued outfit of earthy browns and reds, a thin forest green tie tucked into a muddy brown sweater with a rust coloured collared shirt. I noted a bag slung over one shoulder and a flush over his cheeks no doubt from the cool autumn air in contrast to the warmth of the building. "It must have slipped my mind, sorry."

"How is he?"

"A little better," I said, the question reigniting my worry for Winston who was by no means out of the woods. And he was alone. All for me to come sit at this desk making every effort to be sane and reliable. I shouldered away those thoughts which settled as an ache behind my temples, "Even ate some of the food you made him. We sat on the porch and watched the sunrise. He was more himself. I hope the others are watching over him."

"I'm very glad to hear it," he set the bag down next to my desk and put a hand on the chair opposite me, "May I sit?"

"Yeh," I shrugged, avoiding eye contact long enough to chew on the inside of my cheek as he sat down and I struggled to say, "I feel like I ought to apologize for last night," he looked at my quizzically, "Strikes me as mixed signals to plot your murder then call you for help with my sick dog."

"I'm aware," he said, leaning back in his chair and crossing his wrists over each other.

"And right now, I'd rather that we didn't continue the trend of kill or be killed in our relationship."

"I'd like that," a slight smile, "A true waste of both our resources."

"Good," I said, clearing my throat. He seemed intrigued, even amused, which only sharpened my words, "Something we can both agree on."

His face, and eyes, warmer now than when he'd sat down, opened to me, lighting every corner of my office, "I propose we move forward with honesty and openness."

"Turn over a new leaf?" I asked skeptically.

"No. I would never condone painting over the vibrant brush strokes of our time together."

"Our time together?" skeptically again.

"Will, I will be honest with you if you are honest with me. I only want to support you."

"And what would reigniting my relationship with Hannibal Lecter say about my sanity? What do you think Dr. Gachet would have to say about that?"

"If you feel it's necessary to discuss it with him you may," he rolled his shoulders slightly, "But for the record I don't doubt your sanity. Do you doubt mine?"

"I'm the last person to ask, believe me."

He let a beat pass, teeth working at his lower lip, "I can only assure you that you have nothing to fear from me. Let me help you."

"I'm not going to *let* you do anything to me."

A slight head tilt, "Mature relationships allow us to maintain our authenticity and integrity throughout. This is my goal, if it is yours I would be glad to hear it. Our choices define us and when we act as if we don't have any, our lives become meaningless. The choice is yours."

"It doesn't feel like I've had much of a choice in anything lately."

"I imagine not," he said with a pause, brow furrowing only slightly, "But your freedom to choose can not be taken away. Nor can you escape it. Inaction or lack of acceptance of varying choices only reduces you to an object in this world, at the mercy of it's circumstances."

"Verses at your mercy?" I didn't know how to accept his words, words were never enough, no matter how well spoken, "And if you feel the *urge* to guide me again, will you?"

"Only if you ask me. I'd rather your choices were your own. Not mine. Not the FBIs."

I frowned, not sure that an existential debate was something I could entirely engage in without at least a small amount of whiskey. But his words struck me. I was tired of feeling helpless. Tired of having other people decide for me. The sinking feeling that I wasn't sure if I could trust my own judgment made my chest tighten. So often my instincts told me one thing while everything else, all logic or framework of normality, said another. I've spent a lifetime not following my defamed instincts.

He put an end to those thoughts with a quirk of his brow and a smile, "I brought you lunch," he said, moving seamlessly from the frozen moment, "And now that I know Winston is on

the mend I would encourage you to allow yourself the same courtesy."

He reached down to the bag he had been carrying and pulled out several containers of food and cloth napkins. He set a container and a napkin down in front of me, "Grilled tomato, chèvre, and thyme baguette; with ham of course," he said.

I opened the container and the smell was enough to drench my mouth in saliva, "A sandwich?"

"Ideal for lunch. No utensils required. Everything contained neatly in between two pieces of bread."

"Smells wonderful," I picked up the sandwich and sunk my teeth into it, realizing I hadn't had breakfast and my stomach was clenching with hunger.

"Your appointment is this afternoon?" Hannibal asked as I chewed.

"Whether I like it or not. In . . .," glanced at my watch, "Half an hour? How quickly time flies. I spent most of the morning engaged in deep philosophical conversation with my rubber tree."

His eyes flitted toward the plant in the corner of my office, "An unexpected but titillating conversationist I'm sure."

"Better than the fern at least. I had someone remove it after it started to ask too many probing questions."

"I'd have done the same thing," he said, eyes closing as he took a bite of his sandwich. How much that man enjoyed food, I thought, how intensely he must taste and smell. It was enough just to watch him.

"Beverly did come to see me," I said, taking another bite and chewing probably noisily, "She meant well but it was still awkward. Work friendships are a tentative thing, prone to breaking under pressure."

"Not always," he said in a hopeful way, "Miss Katz could very well be a fine pillar of support for you."

I bristled somewhat, which did not go unnoticed, "It may start out that way but any friend I've ever had has been more of a weight than a support."

"Because of your empathic skills?"

"I'm not social by nature but yeh," I wiped at my mouth, "Being a receptacle for a friend's anxiety about their relationships or their car or their electric bill is exhausting, even if they don't mean to do it."

"I don't have many friends either," he noticed my quizzical expression and continued, "I have many people that want to come to a dinner party of mine but very few, if any, that I would

trust into my inner life. I am comfortable with myself as I am, but am less confident that someone would be able to relate to me in any significant way."

"Then why have dinner parties?"

"I love to share my art," he smiled, "And it is important to stay social, even if it is shallow, it keeps me inspired."

"What are you afraid people couldn't relate to?"

"When I was young I identified greatly with the creature from Frankenstein. Thrust into a world that was unprepared and unwilling to see his beauty beyond the horrors of his appearance. Driven mad by a sense of purpose he would never be able to realize. Worse still he was created and abandoned at the moment of rebirth by his own creator. Banished and rejected by the one person he so desperately wanted to know him. Through no fault of his own. It was just how he was made."

"So you've always known you were different?"

"Yes," he inhaled deeply, smoothing his napkin back down in his lap, "Though I gratefully rose above the fervent desire to try and be normal."

"Really? You have the act down pretty damn good."

"It'd be more accurate to call it a balance. Who I am at one of my dinner parties is no less who I am than when I am alone, merely different parts. It was never my intention, nor would it be sustainable, to live a false life. And though I may not think like other people, that by no means makes how I think any less beautiful or valid in this world."

"But like Frankestien's monster you wander the earth in search for true connection?" I chanced reaching out to him, and felt the outer warmth of confidence, a sort of steady hum of acceptance and from somewhere deeper an emergent sense of longing, like a wound that wouldn't stop bleeding. I immediately stopped, like fingertips running over a suddenly hot surface, when he looked up and met my eyes. He followed the same wavelength back and I felt his consciousness touch mine and my blood pounded suddenly in my ears, breath was short. Backed off. Far off. Too much. Too fast.

He watched me intently, almost seeming aware of the intrusion, even enjoying it, "The wait only makes the true thing all the more worthwhile," he said, "And patience allows clarity free from doubt."

We both resumed eating, the sandwich far better than any bologna or other presumed meat in paste form I was resigned to oft pack for lunch. Time passed easily and it wasn't long before another knock came to my door.

"Oh, excuse me," from the door, "I'm early," a man in a plain grey suit and black tie stood in the doorway, "Will Graham?"

"I'm Will Graham," I said, glancing at Hannibal then to the man again.

“I’m Dr. Lewis Gachet. If you need a few more minutes to,” he surveyed my desk, “Finish lunch, I’ll go grab a cup of joe.”

“You *are* early,” I felt my stomach clench, heart quicken.

From the corner of my narrowed vision I saw Hannibal rise and extended his hand, “Dr. Gachet, I’m Dr. Hannibal Lecter.”

“Dr. Lecter,” he took Hannials hand, “Jack told me all about you.”

“Really,” he said, sitting back lightly in his seat, “Then you are here to relieve me of my patient.”

“He was never officially your patient,” Dr. Gachet said with a jerky shrug that was possibly meant to come off as good natured. His face was worn and lined, uneven with decades old acne scars and his grimacing smile seeming like a forced though practiced thing.

“True,” Hannibal conceded.

“Of course, I’m happy to be a resource to the FBI and it’s employees.”

“Where did you go to school, Doctor?” Hannibal asked.

“McGill. Will you be long?”

“No,” Hannibal glanced at me, gathering his bag, “Will, I’m sorry for the abrupt end to our lunch. Please finish at your leisure. I will go check on Winston for you,” I didn’t have time to react or reject the offer, only able to stare breathlessly as Hannibal folded his napkin neatly on my desk and turned to Dr. Gachet, “It was a pleasure meeting you, Doctor,”

“Same.”

“Winston?” Dr. Gachet asked.

“My dog,” I interjected, “He’s been ill.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

Hannibal left quickly and I felt completely unprepared for a therapy session regardless of waiting for it all morning. Why did this guy show up fifteen minutes early to our appointment? Some sort of power play? I had little tolerance for that kind of base masculine bullshit.

“You want to stay here?” I asked him.

“Works for me. First session is mostly formalities. Can I sit?”

“Fine.”

“Ok,” he sat and groaned as he did so, maybe his knees, maybe his back, hard to tell. He seemed too young for it, maybe he’d been injured, maybe something innocuous like an old football injury or a fall from a ladder clearing gutters, “So this will be a lot of questions, mostly your history, some recent events and general get to know yous, okay?”

“Ten sessions?”

“Ten sessions.”

“I’m sure Jack explained to you that I don’t have much faith in therapy.”

“In general or just for you?”

“I’m sure it’s great for some people who need the excuse to indulge in self preoccupation; I do that enough without professional intervention.”

“You do that enough? In what way?”
“If I didn’t keep an eye on the nuts and bolts of my mind on a daily basis I wouldn’t be here.”

“You’re telling me you already put a lot of work into maintaining your mental wellness.”

“I’ve redefined the term mental wellness for myself.”

“There isn’t one definition, true, it’s different for everyone. But regardless, the FBI has a definition and it’s my job to see where you fall within that,” his words came quickly, easily, as if they were written out beforehand. There was confidence there but no hubris. He also projected no sense of himself. Contained. It was irksome to me but in another light could just be heightened professionalism.

“Or what?”

“Or you reconsider the FBI as the healthiest fit for you.”

Again, there was little added feeling or expression in his words or face, making me only want to push him more, “Plenty of people snap with no warning. Especially in this profession. You think you can tell when someone is near the edge?”

“Mr. Graham, I can only do my very best, check the boxes, cross the t’s, the mysteries of the human mind that you’re referring to are beyond me, or anyone.”

“So formalities.”

“If you’d like.”

“I can’t help feel we just went in a giant circle.”
“Back to the point you made about therapy not working on you.”

“Yes.”

“Then maybe it would help to see this less as therapy and more checking under the hood, those nuts and bolts, check your work.”

I rolled my eyes at the overused metaphor, even if I’d started it, “Ok, fine, go right ahead.”

“Where are you from?” he asked, pulling from his jacket a notebook and pen and placing it on his knee.

“All over, moved around a lot.”

“How would you describe the atmosphere of your home growing up?”

“Small. Just me and my dad.”

“Constrained?”

“Limited. We were just getting by.”

“Are your parents still living?”

“My father’s dead. Mom, I don’t know.”

“History of mental illness or chemical dependency in your family?”

“What were you before you were a therapist, Dr. Gachet?”

“I was in law enforcement. We have that in common.”

“Rather dramatic change; what happened?”

“I was in an accident. The risks of bodily harm are far less in the practice of psychology.”

“Sometimes.”

“Family history?”

“My dad didn’t talk much about my mom so I don’t know. Dad drank . . . often.”

“That one of the reasons you moved around a lot?”

“No official diagnosis, on either side, so far as I know.”

“Okay. And yourself; any hospitalizations for mental health reasons?”

“That’s a funny joke.”

“Apologies,” he said eyes wandering around my office and over my body and face in an unsettling way, “Besides the most recent of course.”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“I was sixteen.”

“For what?”

I took in a deep breath, “A psychotic break.”

He looked down at his notepad, “Related to your empathy disorder?”

“There was apparently a lot of argument regarding just what to diagnose me with.”

“Okay. And then what?”

“And my dad didn’t want me falling into the blackhole that is America’s mental health care system so he pulled me out and we moved on.”

“That must have been difficult.”

“I adapted.”

“I’m sure you did. Scary thing to happen to a kid though.”

“Yeh,” unbidden memories, faded and incomplete not just from time, flickered through my head and I shoved them back. Dark times. When I’d first realized I was different. When I knew nothing would be the same again.

“How did you come back from it?” he asked, eerily echoing my own desperate question to myself, “Medication?”

“Ineffectual.”

“So you just managed?”

“I did. I had to.”

“And here you are.”

“Here I am.”

Dr. Gachet’s eyes narrowed and he again easily flowed into the next checkpoint, “What do you feel are the biggest things you struggle with right now? Day to day.”

“I just spent months locked up in a cage actually. And not only people at work but everyone else in my life has had enough time to adjust their opinion of me from at best indifferent to horrified so what do you think?”

“Your time at the BSHCI was difficult. Returning to your life after your acquittal is even more difficult.”

“To say the least.”

“Are social difficulties something you’ve always struggled with?”

“I know who I am. What people think of me is beyond my control. My issues are mine to deal with. Not theirs.”

“You have no support system. What about Hannibal Lecter?”

“You’re asking if he is a support person?” A support person. I didn’t want to tell this doctor anything about Hannibal and me. The impossible tangle of emotion notwithstanding, the intensity of what I felt from Hannibal, for Hannibal, his actions toward me, my knowledge of his own darkness; were all things I had no words for. And no desire to even attempt to shed light on. For a moment a flare of possessiveness flared through me, unexpected, I didn’t want to share any of it, what I felt, what I feared, with anyone.

“He was, unofficially, working with you on several cases, cases that led to your institutionalization. You know what they say about those that share fox holes.”

“What do they say?” I asked, feigning curiosity.

“They’re bonded. Their shared experience becomes a precious thing. These types of relationships are typically volatile, they’re easily ignited.”

“You’re fishing, Doctor, and it’s alarmingly obvious. You might as well just ask me directly.”

“During your illness, and even after treatment, you accused Hannibal Lecter of being the Chesapeake Ripper. You accused him of unethical therapeutic practices and nearly ruined his career.”

“Are you suggesting I should feel guilty?”

“The encephalitis was treated. Any underlying condition may have fed a host of delusions, prior or post treatment.”

“I’m not delusional.”

“Not anymore.”

“Aren’t you here to tell me that?”

“I’m gauging your level of perception, your reliability in relating your own narrative.”

“How am I doing?”

“ P ersecutory delusions are conceptualized as threat beliefs, hallucinations represent powerful destructive forces that the sufferer feels powerless to confront. It will be my job, during our time together, to support alternative explanations for your experiences, enhance your coping strategies, and help you identify what triggers these delusions.”

“Oh, so you’ve already concluded that it wasn’t just encephalitis; that I’m mentally ill.”

“It wasn’t your first time experiencing psychosis. As you said.”

“On a day to day basis I don’t struggle with delusions and I don’t believe I’m mentally ill. I’m empathetic, more so than I want to be sometimes. It’s convenient to call it an empathy disorder for those that need to categorize me but for me, it’s just how I am. I have nightmares, I don’t eat enough vegetables, and I don’t have many, if any, friends, I don’t want friends. But I’m good at my job. I enjoy my job.”

“Teaching? Or catching killers?”

“I just want to teach and move on with my life.”

“Could you? After all you’ve seen?”

“Is there a more plausible course of action?”

“No. I’m glad you’re optimistic.”

“I’m not taking medication again. And I’m not going to let anyone suggest I’m losing my mind.”

“Did Dr. Lecter treat you for psychosis?”

“I would need to sign something, right, in order for you to speak to him about my treatment.”

“True. But your time with him was significant.”

“It was. But he never told me I was crazy.”

“Hmm,” this was his first “hmm” of the conversation and I met it with disdain.

“Tell me again what your objective is here because I can’t help but feel attacked.”

He took a deep breath and his brow leveled into shadow, “I’m not attacking, Will. I need to know how you are right now. Yes, I’m asking about the past, about Dr. Lecter, only to obtain context for the present. You need to pay careful attention to how you are coping now and you need to work with me on this or,” he let his words wander off.

“Or I leave the FBI.”

He leaned forward in his chair, “This is about your mental wellness. Not about persecution. Not about threats. Anyone, not just a professional, could posit that you went through a severe trauma, or traumas, and how you come back from it is just as, or even more important than the actual events,” he leaned back, “So. Do you feel you can be honest with me?” he smiled and it was another flat, clay thing, “At least so I can dot my “i”s?”

I heard his words but didn’t feel his sincerity. It could have been just his focus on work, like a mechanic laying out an extensive repair job to a customer, “I will tell you what I can, what is relevant to me continuing to work with the FBI.”

“Good,” he clapped his knee, seemingly satisfied, “So can I count on you recording for me how much you are sleeping each night? Or any nightmares you are having. I’d also be interested, in our next session, to hear about what coping skills you are using that are helpful. Sound good?”

“Are we meeting here again?”

“Is that easier?”

“Yes.”

“Okay then, there is an option for biweekly appointments, if you feel that would be helpful, or this time next week.”

“I’d rather get this over with as soon as possible.”

“So twice a week then. How about Friday?”

“Fine,” I said, feeling like a crushed tin can under his foot. I hated that someone else on this earth knew such details about me. Even though I knew he couldn’t possibly experience me like I experienced other people I didn't like the idea that he would even try.

He stood, “Good to meet you. I promise, we’ll get through this,” he took several strides toward the door, “I hope your dog feels better.”

I said nothing more, just watched as the door closed behind him and prayed that no one else would feel the need to stop by. I glanced at the clock and saw that an hour had passed. How? My armpits were chill with sweat and I could smell my own discomfort. I thought of Hannibal, how he was talking about making my own choices, not being an object loose on the waves of circumstance. That exact feeling, the feeling of being helpless, was exactly what this therapy felt like. I attempted a brief reframe, that I’d gotten through worse and could get through this too, but dread and insecurity tainted those thoughts like a creeping damp. This doctor, who kept himself blank and expressionless, asked questions more like a cop than a therapist, filled me with fear. I wondered why Jack chose him for a moment but it made total sense. I cleaned up lunch and sat back in my chair, considering another hour of sitting here before I could go home. An hour.

Chapter End Notes

Who doesn't love a fancy sandwich? Thanks for reading!

Searching

Chapter Notes

> Hannibal's POV. The obvious canon difference will be obvious in this chapter (a Hannibal kill not set in Series Two) but will explain more after.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Winston was out of the bedroom and was laying in one of the many dog beds in the living room. The afternoon sun, still with a certain amount of warmth despite the tilt of the Earth's axis, had warmed the small room and the dogs were lounging in comfort when I entered Will's house. Only a few of them got up to sniff my legs, the others perked their ears and scented the air, allowing me a moment to remove my shoes and breathe in my surroundings. Will's scent, as it had always been, was an earthy intoxicating smell, permeating over everything. Even the smell of the dogs couldn't dampen the rousing scent of him.

I went to Winston and briefly petted his head. He no longer smelled as he had, fortunate evidence toward his recovery, and he even wagged his tail when he saw me. I went to the kitchen and found most of it as I'd left it. Putting a bowl of the chicken and rice in the microwave I gathered the rest of the supplies and waited. Ran my fingers over the countertops. Remembered Will limp and helpless under my hands, the choking sounds of his breath and the tightness as I thrust the tube down his throat and fed him Abigail's ear. I felt the blossom of regret in my breast, wishing that I'd had another way, wishing that my powers of precognition were stronger. I could, and had, only acted in ways that assured my own security, each stride drawing me closer to safety, hoping that Will would keep pace and follow me there.

It pained me to imagine the struggle, the heated tussle against the ties he'd wrapped around himself, seeking freedom from both the literal and figurative restraints that bound him. I wanted him to know that I was there for him. That I knew what it was like. I'd gone through the same thing. The ardent swell of warmth and affection I felt for him was a staggering thing, something I'd recognized from the very start as dangerous to my anonymity while being frightfully irresistible. For the first time in many years I'd entertained the possibility of getting close to someone. Negotiated with myself to take a chance and weather the risks for the sake of experiencing the magnificent. I knew with certainty that he was, if not for the confines put upon him by the world and himself, a creature of pure beauty and vibrance.

I gave Winston water, milk thistle, and then the food. I sat cross legged on the rug while various furry bodies passed by me, wet noses seeking information, and even found myself enjoying the varied comfort of each of their personalities. Perhaps I hadn't given them the chance they deserved. They were a gentle, kind presence, not harsh and unyielding like humans. I understood more and more how Will could be so attached to them. Happy with Winston's reception of the treatment I stood and settled onto the dusty bench of Will's piano.

It was out of tune but I enjoyed the feel of the keys under my fingers and closed my eyes, letting the notes echo through Will's quiet place of seclusion and through every room within my own mind. The shadow of Will that I kept there, graphite shadows of the real thing, relaxed under the calming notes.

I rose and strode to his bedroom, standing in the doorway and flared my nostrils, curious, unimpeded by the need for discretion. I smelled his sweat from sleep, recent nightmares, and I smelled the bitter tang of semen from a pile of clothes on the floor. Will was often tense. I was reassured to know he allowed at least brief moments of release. One of the smaller dogs had followed me into the room and I glanced at him huffing at the ground, clawing the mess of fabric. Almost out of protest at his actions, his lack of respect, I scooped up the pile of clothes and threw them into a nearby basket. I extracted one shirt of his, the one with the strongest scent, and held it in my hands, running my fingertips over the thin folds of over worn, over washed cotton, almost feeling the raised goosebumps of Will's skin against the fabric. I lifted it to my nose and closed my eyes, inhaling deeply, enjoying the heat it brought to my body, the arousal awakening in the hollowed space. I folded the shirt into a small square and slipped it into my jacket pocket. He wouldn't miss it.

I hadn't had much time to look into Dr. Gachet. I kept tentative ties with the psychiatric community in Baltimore and had several avenues to take in investigating his practice. I had no reason to be leery of him as an individual out right, nor did I question Jack's motives for seeking another professional, but I felt a profound need to protect Will from influence in his time of convalescence. I needed certainty that this doctor wouldn't quiel or squash the particulars of Will Graham's mind. I was uneasy.

I returned to the piano, moving from Chopin to Rachmaninoff, curious what melodies played the best in this space. Which would Will enjoy most? The somber musings of Chopin's broken heart or the volcanic ferocity of Rachmaninoff's anguish? A few notes of light Handel rose from my fingers, meeting my desire for his own quiet peace of mind, if only he were here to hear it. The vibrations of the keys and strings faded as I sat back and cast my eyes over to his bookshelf. Man's Search for Meaning. Several biographies of Napoleon and Emerson and a surprising amount of fantasy novels. I glazed quickly at the names, mentions of dragons and magic and smiled. Will appreciated the escape they had to offer. Portals to other worlds where all the irreparable truths of our own leaden existence didn't apply.

I pulled one of the books from the shelf and settled in one of the arm chairs. Winston was in a bed right at my feet and I petted him briefly before opening the cover to the book wherein a large map folded out. Names like the Mountain Kingdom and drawings of mythical creatures adorned the well worn paper. I imagine he's read this many times. I quietly read, stroking Winston's head until I heard the sound of a car approaching. I set the book on my knee and closed my eyes. I knew it was Will. So did the dogs. They all stood, stretched, tails wagging, tongues lolling from their mouths in anticipation. I remained still, enjoying my place in the landscape of Will's welcome home, the assurances of safety and familiarity that would greet him. Could I be safe and familiar, as I once was for him? The part of me that longed to wag my tail and jump on him upon his return was certain that all our trials, all the painful memories, were only part of a larger fabric of undeniable truths that fortified the ongoing threads. I hoped he no longer feared me. But I couldn't count on it. I'm alive because I've always been alone. My continued vigilance of danger to myself and my work was still of

great importance. But I'd found myself more at odds with that credo than ever before. Which scared me.

When the door opened I heard Will greet the dogs and I turned to watch him. His eyes dropped nearly instantly to Winston who had stood and walked, though weakly, over to his owner, tail wagging. Will dropped to his knees and hugged Winston, a smile bright and achingly authentic on his face, "Hey, Winston!" his arms wrapped around the dog and for a moment his face was lost in fur, his next words choked with emotion, directed to me, "I-I didn't think you'd be here still, thank you, he seems better," he pressed his forehead to Winston's, "Thank god,"

I stood, setting the book on the arm of the chair, "I thought I'd remain until you got home, I have no appointments until later this afternoon."

"I'm just so glad," Will stood, "I thought," he shook his head, dismissing the macabre, "I think he's going to be okay."

"Winston is strong. I knew he would prevail."

Will turned and reopened the door, letting the dogs leave, including Winston, who he glanced after with concern. In their absence, like a man robbed of his cane, he wavered, shoulders dropping, "I maybe should have stayed at work but I didn't have anything to do," he moved to the kitchen, eyes only briefly meeting mine as I followed him slowly, "And that appointment was," he sighed, gathering dirty dog bowls into the sink, "Challenging."

"As you knew it would be," I said, stepping closer to stand at the edge of the kitchen counter, "What were your impressions of Dr. Gachet?"
"Hard to say," at the quirk of my eye brow he continued, "He is very guarded. Very . . ." he searched for the right word, "Sunken. I don't know," he worked at getting food together, "He's former law enforcement. I can't help but wonder how Jack knows him, why he picked him."

"Perhaps it was the most straightforward option."

"Do I sound suspicious?"

"I would be too. Your personal life and your privacy have been usurped of late, it's natural to doubt the sincerity of someone, even if they claim to just be doing their job."
Will set the food down on the ground and stood with a hand on the counter, steadying himself, standing close enough to me so I could observe the dark circles under his eyes, the full bodied fatigue that made him look as if he'd just been pulled aboard from floating adrift on an ocean. It made me want to cook him a healthy, filling meal, one that would allow him to sleep soundly and deeply without dreams.

"I hate it," his inhale was shaky, "The whole process. It's invasive and gauche and bad science. No offense."

"None taken," I assured. I could smell the chilled sweat on his skin, musky on his clothes, "Though this is necessary. In Jack's eyes."

“I know, I know,” he closed his eyes and his face faltered, his hands creeping up to his elbows, “It’s just . . . an unsettling feeling.”

“Dr. Gachet is not looking to profile you. He is evaluating based on a predetermined set of criteria.”

“Then why do I feel like meat picked apart from bones?”

I took a step closer and, carefully assessing the ebbs and flows of my perception of the man in front of me, I put a hand slowly on his upper arm, “Rest. Take it one session at a time.”

His eyes came to meet mine for the first time and they were so wide and blue they gave the impression that ships could have passed through them. The physical contact, the simple touch reconnected him to his surroundings and he took a breath, a pained silence heavy on my heart before he said in barely a whisper, “I’m afraid they’ll put me away again.”

The vocalized fear caused a shudder to pass through him and his jaw clamped shut, eyes fluttering in the effort to keep in a rockslide of emotion. I stepped forward enough to tilt my chest paralel to his, the small movement along with a delicate pressure on his arm was as far as I was willing to go, an offer, at the least.

I never allowed myself to hope Will would come to me, breach the physical boundaries that were so important to him, so when he moved to press himself into my chest I was unprepared for the sudden embrace, for the arm moving to my back, between my shoulder blades, and the barest feeling of fingers curling into the fabric of my jacket. A small noise left him, somewhere between a sigh and a groan as I wrapped my arms around him and closed my eyes, letting the vibrations of his shaking breaths pass through my chest, “I won’t let that happen,” I told him, barely able to withstand the feeling of his heart beating against mine, my nose buried in his curls. I stood as tall and firm as I could, wanting to offer him every ounce of strength I had, if he were willing to take it. It lasted what only seemed a moment, then the feeling of his stubble passing quickly over my cheek before he drew himself back, running a hand over his nose and said weakly, “I’m sorry, I may have,” he cleared his throat, “Got snot on your,” he gestured toward my jacket.

“Not a problem,” I said. I’ve had to clean much worse from my jackets.

“Did you,” he asked, clearing his throat and blinking wetness from his eyes, “Maybe want to stay?” his eyebrow rose in tentative expression and his cheeks were flushed, “I could make dinner,” he shrugged and it was intensely endearing.

“I’d love to, Will,” I said with a small smile, “But I have an appointment.”

“Yeh, oh yeh,” he took a step backward, “You said that. Not that I’m that great of a cook. You would have had to be satisfied with some sort of tragically uncreative pasta variation.”

“I’d be happy to teach you sometime.”

“How to cook?”

“Some fundamentals, at least,”

“Maybe. Up to you to take that risk, most of what I eat is from a can. And I don’t even own a can opener.”

“It may surprise you, you may enjoy it.”

“Or maybe I’ll maintain the mystery.”

I watched him gather himself, almost embarrassed, and return to the long stretching corridors of his mind, leaving me to my own. In time, we’d meet each other there, I was sure of it. I would have to leave him for now.

I removed myself from the orbits of his small, cozy home and went out into the still darkness, a smile warming my face. When I turned back from my car door, I saw him standing in his open door, bathed in warm light, watching me leave.

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I descended the stairs, the dark cool and reassuring before I flicked on a light. Though the space was expansive it was orderly and smelled clean and sterile. Apart from the man chained to a chair.

From around the corner I could hear heavy breathing, “Oh my god, you’re back,” he sobbed. I rounded the corner to find the insurance agent chained to a metal chair against the wall, “I thought you were going to leave me alone down here,” he was slumped forward, chains rattling as his face fell nearly onto his knees, “In the dark.”

“My apologies, Mr. Caldwell,” I said, “I’d thought I’d have more free time today to spend time with you but I was called away to attend to a personal matter,” I removed my jacket, still smelling of Will, and folded it over the chair opposite the dark haired man. I sat down and started to roll up my sleeves, “Though I assure you, you will have my complete attention now,” he was still crying as I sighed and said, “I really hadn’t planned to keep you alive for any extended period of time.”

“Oh god, please don’t kill me,” he begged, eyes wide and pupil blown, clothes drenched in sweat even in the cool room, “Just let me go, please, I don’t understand what I did, I don’t, you won’t hear from me again, I swear, I won’t tell anyone, just let me go, please, please.”

“I’m disappointed to hear that even with the time allotted you aren’t able to comprehend your misdeeds.”

“Misdeeds?! I’m an insurance adjuster for christ sake, what are you talking about?!”

“Please don’t shout,” I instructed, “Your particular prejudice is exceedingly irksome to me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, please, I just want to go home.”

“You were alarmingly uncouth and highly presumptive during your examination of me.”

Realization and a vague impression of understanding passed over his face but it was quickly ushered way by desperate anger and a nashing of teeth, “I don’t care who you decide to fuck! I had to ask the goddamn question for my assessment, god,” he pulled and strained at his chains, “What was I supposed to think, christ, you think you’re the first person like you to lie to me? HIV status changes rates, people don’t tell me the truth!”

I let him rage against the restraints, the wild animalistic drive to free himself a stark contrast to my stillness, “A person like me?”

“And you’re gonna kill me for that? I was just doing my job! Fuck!”

“It was not your job to be homophopic nor to judge me, or any of your patients, on how and whom they love.”

“Fine!” he jerked his body so wildly one leg of his chair rose from the ground, “Fuck every boy this side of the Eastern seaboard until your dick falls off, I don’t give a fuck, you fucking faggot, just let me go!”

I realize that I’d bitten my lower lip to the point of drawing blood. I released it and licked lightly at my own blood then smiled, taking a deep breath, realizing he was entirely incapable of a worthwhile conversation, “I’ve had a very enjoyable day,” I stood, squaring my shoulders and smoothing the fabric of my waistcoat, remembering the feeling of Will in my arms and the tentative hope for a brighter future dawning before us, “Seeing your blood pool at my feet will only improve it.”

I straddled the chair, wrapping my hands around his throat, finally taking from him the odious words, born from his ignorance and hate, that spilled so easily from him. Mr. Caldwell was unconscious, a pungent mess of limbs and hair in my arms after only a few moments. I hadn’t planned to kill him, or anyone, not for months, but I had been unable to resist. One of the many uses of the darkest parts of myself; punishing the abhorrent.

I heard the phone ringing as I severed the last artery of Mr. Caldwell’s heart. I was awaiting a return phone call regarding Dr. Gachet but would have to call back as soon as I was able. I’d gathered all the blood in several buckets and even as the last fateful messages from Mr. Caldwell’s shocked nervous system told his arms and legs to twitch I pulled the still warm heart from his chest with a delicious sucking pop. Healthy living, I thought to him, examining the organ with pleasure. The next hour was spent bisecting his body, gathering the kidneys when I saw what good condition they were in, and wrapping his body in plastic. After setting his body in the cooler I turned off all but one light and stripped off all my clothes. I would have to plan the right time to display my kill, and it may not be tonight, as much as I wanted rid of him completely.

I left the soiled clothes in the basement to soak and be laundered later. Emerging from the dark basement into my warm kitchen, I took a moment to stretch. The tension that had laden my limbs felt as if it had finally been released. Today was a good day. Not only had I been able to release my accumulated anger and sense of injustice on the insurance agent, a cause honorable enough to count as one of the Ripper’s kills, I had been rewarded for my patience with Will. He felt he was able to be vulnerable with me again. And perhaps now, vulnerable in a new way. I wondered how he would receive vulnerability in me.

I washed my hands vigorously, scrubbing my nails in quiet compilation; would Will have approved of killing Mr. Caldwell? Had Will ever experienced the effrontery of someone questioning or making assumptions about his sexuality? We'd not discussed these issues in therapy. All I'd been able to gather is that physicality, so difficult to remove from mental and emotional intimacy, was something difficult for Will to experience. That sort of vulnerability is an impossible thing to ask of him unless trust is achieved.

I've never tried to hide my sexuality. I also never expected the world to be accepting of it, not completely. How much humanity loves a label, categorization leading to anticipation and preparedness. I never fit in any category. Nor did I want to. But as I'd been reminded so often in these last months, I am human, and aside from the physical contact with the people I kill, I am afforded little opportunity for physical contact, let alone intimacy, in any other way.

I glanced up at my naked reflection in the darkened window and took a deep breath, watching my chest expand, ribs showing at my sides briefly. I watched my hand trace a path down the hairs on my chest and stomach and let me fingertips stretch over the sensitive skin between my hip bone and the base of my penis. Dipping my palm lower I held myself, stroking a few times to excite the blood. Part of me wanted to reject these desires, the need for closeness. Another part was also desperate for that connection and unashamed of what my body was capable of, what pleasure I could experience and elicit in others. I longed for a reciprocated sense of belonging. The feeling ached within me as it never had before. I closed my eyes, trying to find some comfort in the killing of Mr. Caldwell, of my participation in the eradication of such ugliness, and refocused.

I picked up the phone and listened to the voicemail. It was about Dr. Gachet. I called back the number, goosebumps rolling up my back over my shoulders as the vigor of my exhersions left me. The phone rang dully until, "Hello?"

"Mr. Bouche, this is Jacob Petersen , returning your missed call regarding Dr. Lewis Gachet."

"Right, Mr. Petersen, thanks for calling me back quickly; you're calling for a reference?"

"I am. Dr. Gachet is looking to take part in a research project I'm heading, I was hoping to hear from you what he could offer to my team."

"He listed me as a reference?"

"He did."

"That's a little surprising."

"Oh?" I shifted to rest my bare hip on the counter, "In what way?"

"He received supervision from us, worked for us, for almost two years, I just never got the impression he enjoyed his time here."

"And your overall impression of him?"
"Look, I don't want to paint the wrong picture here, really, he was a fine employee, he was never late, finished all his documentation, really,"

I provided a pause, “I’m sorry, I don't understand. You sound unsure.”

“I can try to be honest, I don’t know what sort of research you are doing, but he has a particular style, he’s an ex cop, it wasn’t surprising, but it didn’t resonate well with all of our clients.”

“Then perhaps research isn’t an unlikely option for his particular style.”

“Maybe. Like I said. He is very disciplined, orderly, but we just couldn’t see him continuing as part of our practice.”

“Thank you, I very much appreciate your honesty,” I said, “Do you know where he worked after being fully licensed?”

“I think he worked at a prison, Pittsburg SCI maybe, I’m not sure, it’s been years, I’m sorry.”

“It seems that would be a better fit for him.”

“Maybe that’s it. He was just more of a bloodhound than a comforter, if you know what I mean.”

“I do. I appreciate your time, Mr. Bouche.”

“No problem.”

“One more question; did you ever know him to have a security clearance or any associations with the FBI or other government agencies?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me, but no, I don't know.”

“Thank you again.”

I hung up. Curious. Perhaps there was a connection with Jack afterall. There is an obvious value to having someone you know certify an employee. But why this man? Jack didn’t let go of things. Once his jaws locked, little to no force could release them, apart from the truth. And the presented truth of the Ripper is not as palatable as he’d hoped. Which only cemented my need to keep vigilant and aware of the FBI’s goingsons. Though perhaps for the first time, something other than my need for secrecy was growing day by day, filling in the dark spaces with newfound sunlight.

Chapter End Notes

I felt the need to kill that insurance guy in this fic. After watching the episode for the third or forth time I understood completly Hannibal's actions. Also, why is Hanni always stealing "dirty" clothes from Will in my fics? It's a strange version of taking a partners

shirt to wear to bed just because you love their smell I suppose . . . anyway, leave a comment, I appreciate all the people reading so so much!

Coffee

Chapter Notes

Will's POV.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I'm typically not a coffee drinker. Doesn't mix well with anxiety. But boredom and bad dreams drew me to the breakroom for a cup of coffee. I hadn't talked to anyone but my dogs all day yesterday. And even then not that much to them. I'd gone to work and gone home with no contact from anyone. Not wholly unusual, happens to me, more often than I'd like but often enough to be normalized. That made entering into a busy breakroom a jarring thing. Bodies bouncing around and off each other like protozoa in a petri dish, conversations of varying volume and zeal echoing around me.

I kept my head down, reaching for a mug in the cupboard as someone who was having a very bad day sidled past me, the faint brush of their seething anger made me shudder and then felt rather than watched them leave like the doppler effect. Mix that with the two women in the corner talking and emoting loudly about their escapades last night and I was reminded in every way possible why I don't come in here. Definitely not a work appropriate conversation. Though her first date sounded promising. And her friend didn't necessarily pass judgment on her sleeping with him, especially when it was such a squeal worthy experience, but there was more to it than that. Her friend was jealous. And tired of her friend's impulsive decisions.

"Will?" I pulled myself from the milieu of emotions and focused on the voice. Turned to see Zeller.

"Hi," I said mid pour, then seeing his heavily bearded pale face and the drag of his sadness down on my shoulders I set down my mug, "How are you?"

"Great," he said, reaching for his own mug, "Just getting coffee," I stepped backward, allowing him access to the pot, "Actually, I was hoping to run into you."

"You were?" he was close enough I could smell he hadn't showered and his mouth smelled heavily and suspiciously like minty mouthwash.

"Yeh," he coughed, adjusting his unsteady posture, "Just wanted you to know that I don't blame you. You know," his eyes impaled mine, making it impossible not to look, "For him getting killed. And you should know," there was a slight slur to his words, "I'm gonna catch this guy, the Ripper, I'm gonna get him," he was breathing heavily, the greasy curls of his hair falling over his furrowed brow. His voice had risen to an uncomfortable volume, "And yeh, we all thought you were a killer, hard not to, you know, when you look at it, at what you do. Matter of time really, I mean, I'm not exactly holding it together myself right now," I

didn't need to look to see what everyone in the breakroom had stopped talking and was focused on us.

I felt the edge of the counter meet my lower back, "I'm sorry Zeller, I wish I could help."

"Oh I know," he stepped uncomfortably close to me, "And if Price were here he'd tell you not to worry about it, to take your time, but he was nicer than I am," he leaned into my face, "Get over your shit, okay? Whatever you're up to with Dr. Lecter," he spat the name, "Just get it together or get out of here. Cuz what good are you otherwise."

In a hot, ear humming moment my eyes focused on a bulging vein in his neck, then the droplets of spittle over my cheek before the sudden image of his temple caved in on the corner of the counter flashed through my head. Blood thick and sticky over my palms as everyone goes running from the breakroom, globs of brain and tendrils of hair between my fingers. My lungs scream for air behind my clenched teeth as from the corner of my eye someone had come up behind Zeller and put his hand on his shoulder, "Hey, buddy, settle down."

Zeller jerked off the hand, "Fine, fine," he finally stepped back, "I'm good, I'm good." He met my eyes one last time, empty mug in hand, "Good seeing you, Will," he stepped back several more steps, announcing to everyone, "We used to work together, you know, you guys know this guy?" he turned, slapping the doorframe on his way out, "Have a beautiful day everyone!"

I stayed at the counter for several moments, feeling too frozen to move. The guy that had intervened said timidly, "You alright?"

"Yeh," I said shakily, "I'm okay, thanks."

The sensation of killing Zellar, luckily not written across my face for anyone to see, clung to me. Everything from the crunch of bone and the shuddering of his limbs, all of it fading slowly to the pounding of my heart. I took my coffee, obviously passing on sugar or cream and was about to make it out when the same guy asked, "Hey, are you . . . *that* Will Graham?"

I left without answering, somehow looking forward to crawling into the relative safety of my office. I set the coffee down and sat, closing my eyes, wishing I could go back in time and convince myself I didn't need the coffee in the first place. I'd understood from Beverly that Zeller wasn't doing well. But I wasn't expecting that. Maybe I should go down there. Talk to Beverly. Talk to Zeller. Maybe not. I didn't know what to do. What to say. Nothing I could say would change anything that'd happened or make anyone feel better. Avoidance, my typical tactic wouldn't work in this situation either. I needed to be down there doing my job. If I could. If I was deemed sane enough.

I glanced at my watch. Dr. Gachet would be here soon. I hadn't returned Hannibal's lunch things yet. I let my eyes fall onto the fine leather bag leaning against my desk and held back tears. But if the tears were mine or mostly the remnants of Zeller's I didn't know.

"Did you record your sleep as I asked?"

“No. Yes. Sort of.”

“Which one.”

“I slept maybe six hours on Wednesday night, that’s actually pretty good for me,” that was the night Hannibal had been over, “And last night I slept maybe four.”

“And where does the sort of come from?”

“I don’t always sleep soundly, so it’s hard to tell just how much sleep I’m actually getting.”

“Nightmares?”

“Dreams.”

“Okay dreams. What did you dream about?”

In the same dark forest there is a cage. A cage like at old zoos where there’s barely enough space for the tiger to pace let alone remember what freedom felt like. The cage is familiar. This time the forest has grown in around the cruel iron bars and the blackened gnarled branches of the trees dipped into the spaces inbetween, obscuring my view of the night sky. Something is still stalking me, somewhere out in the blackness, it’s claws indistinguishable from the trees.

“You want to analyze my dreams? Kind of old school.”

“Dreams are especially significant in your case.”

“Are they?

In what feels like one last frantic attempt at escape I’m throwing myself against the bars, shaking them, throwing all my weight into the door with no effect. My teeth are bared like an animal, fear driving me to tears until exhausted, I collapse to the ground. Only when I look up do I see the creature in front of the cage. It’s form shifts like I’m looking at it through water and it’s not a creature, it’s a man.

“I’ve read your file here at the FBI.”

“And talked to Jack?”

“You're surprised?”

“It’s not paranoia if people are actually after you.”

“Do you feel paranoid?”

“I just want to be left alone but there always seems to be too many people overly interested in what’s going on in my head.”

“If whatever is going on in your head is hurting you, you can’t blame people right, or if it could hurt other people.”

“What about saving people?”

“We both know what your work saving people has cost you.”

“Well, I figure it’s worth it.”

“Until you can’t make the dark thoughts go away,” he seems concerned, curious, but every time I blink I think I can see the bars running vertical across my field of vision, “Do you still think about killing people? Is that what you dreamed about last night and you don’t want to tell me?”

“It’s personal. And dream analysis is hardly a reliable or respected practice in modern psychology, so far as I know.”

“Your dreams, more than anyone else I’ve seen, are a gauge, a canary in the coal mine if you will, to your overall mental wellbeing. I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t think it would help.”

“I dream I'm in a cage. Not unlike the one I was actually in. And there’s something there, something watching me.”

“Something or someone?”

The man places his hands on the door of the cage. I see the rust from the weathered iron break loose and cover his pale hands. The sound of the door giving way makes me fall back to the far side of the cage. And I know this person. And they know me. I rise to my feet and when I reach for their hand I can feel the starry dome of the sky above us, the moonlight as warm as the sun on my bare skin. I feel unsteady, muscles cramped and screaming from confinement as I fall into his arms and the forest around us falls away into familiar warm surroundings.

“Someone. I don’t know who.”

“How does the dream make you feel?”

“Afraid. And then . . . safe.”

“So it’s a good dream.”

“It’s unusual for me, believe me.”

“Must have felt good.”

“It felt better than the harshness of waking life.”

“And do your dreams still follow you to waking life?”

“I’m assuming you’re only asking if the violent dreams follow me.”

“Yes.”

“Sometimes they do.”

“And what do you do when that happens?”

“I ground myself.”

“Good. And that helps?”

“Yes.”

“Did you do that, ground yourself, when you were younger, when you were first hospitalized?”

“No. I didn’t know how.” I thought again about that time, not wanting to, forced to, and remembered thinking that there was something deep inside me, a violent, destructive thing that was and would always be there, always looking for purchase, a way to be seen.

The dream dissolves into colour and sound and shape. There is warmth and a heartbeat and breath. In the way that you are aware of dreams without details I know there is a body next to me but their features are clouded. Vague impressions of my fingertips over skin and someone running their hands through my hair, a shifting mass of muscle as we embrace. When I wake up I’m uncomfortably aroused and shaken. It’d felt so real that I spread a hand across the sheets to the cool side of the bed, just to be sure no one was there. I’d fallen back to my pillow and closed my eyes, chasing that fading warmth like squares of sunlight on a wall. Wrapped my hand around my erection and arched my hips. Wished it could have lasted a few minutes longer. Felt so real.

“Were you able to ground yourself during your recent work with the FBI?”

“Not well. Though I was physically ill, which may have complicated things.”

“So you think you’d be able to handle it better now?”

“That’s why you’re here.”

“That wasn’t my question,” when I didn’t answer he continued, “Is it still worth the risk?”

“To me?”

“To everyone else.”

By the time I got home from the appointment it was almost dark. It’s overcast and a gust of wind blows leaves across my driveway, rich with the smell of oncoming rain. Or snow if it got cold enough. When I got inside I let the dogs out, fed them using the last of the chicken Hannnibal had made, and stood on my porch. I need a long walk. Hat. Gloves. Extra layer of wool in case it rained. The dogs and I walked until it was fully dark and I could barely see the distant lights of my house. I carried Buster for a little bit after his paws got too muddy and wet and decided to turn back.

It’d been so long since I’d been in therapy. Actual therapy. Somehow what Hannibal and I did didn’t fit the predetermined mold. What I do, what I think, isn’t what people generally understand, or want to understand. And when it comes to risk I don’t typically care what happens to me. But I don’t want to put anyone else in danger. By my hand or anyone else's. There have been times in the last year that I’d felt so lost in the delusion, the murders of other people, that I’ve lost track of how much of that desire, that urge, was mine to begin with and how much was what I drew from them. Part of me enjoyed it, sought the release, the shape and structure it gave life and death. Which made me sick, I guess. And it wasn’t a secret anymore.

When I got back to the house I started a fire and considered making something for dinner as I grabbed the phone on the wall. Stopped myself. I heard the dial tone in my ear until it went to a steady hum from disuse.

I hadn’t talked to him for several days. What would I even say to him? Would he be interested in my dreams? Would he mention me hugging him? Could he explain to me why I did it? I’d hugged Alana when I needed it.

I held down the recall button to get the dial tone back and dialed.

“Hello?”

“Hannibal.”

“Will, good evening,” there was a pause and the sound of him adjusting his hold on the phone, “Are you alright? Winston?”

“We’re both fine. Just got back from a walk.”

“Lovely.”

Paused, feeling self conscious, knowing I wanted, needed, to talk but couldn’t find the words that mattered, “Orion is back. Or maybe he's been back for awhile, maybe I haven’t been paying attention.”

“Always a welcome return.”

“I, uh,” I unzipped my coat, finally warm, throwing it over a nearby chair, “Have your things. From lunch,” cleared by throat, “I wasn’t sure when we’d see each other again. But wanted to return them. Are you home?”

“I am. However I’m just leaving.”

“Oh.”

“Though I will be at Quantico in the near future if you wanted to return them to me then.”

“Quantico? For what?”

The barest of pauses but it spoke volumes, “Jack called me to consult on a case.”

“Oh,” again. God I’m an idiot, “Of course he did,” I sighed, “Is that going to be a regular thing again?”

“Hard to be sure,” he said, sounding distant, “Are you available tomorrow?”

“Why?”

“I’m not overly concerned with my utensils but it sounds as if there’s something on your mind.”

“And I’d want to talk to you about it?”

“You called me, Will.”

“I’m getting my hair cut tomorrow,” I said quickly, “I’ll see you at work.”

I hung up.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Zeller. Part of the reason why Price was killed, as tragic as it was, I felt that it would disrupt the Team in even a more signficant way than when it was Bev. Zeller depended on Price, their humour kept the work managable. But yeh. It hurts. And yeh it's a little grey but in this version peeps know Chilton wasn't the Ripper after all, that he is still out there . . . also lol, "I'm getting a haircut" oh Will, so sensitive.

Busy

Chapter Notes

Another chapter, from Hannibal's POV, because they blend so easily.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The dial tone rang suddenly and harshly in my ear. I hung up the phone and replaced the glove on my hand. Unfortunate timing. Perhaps it would have been better if I hadn't picked it up at all. Mr. Caldwell was lying at my feet in pieces. I wanted him out of my house and needed the evening for my work. I usually do this unheeded by any other obligations, mind clear, expansive as a glacier, at peace and lost in my art. Gathering up the bags and securing the zipper on my plastic suit, I had an undeniable sense of being needed elsewhere.

For a brief moment I considered stashing Mr. Caldwell away, back into a dark corner of my basement and foregoing my responsibility for the sake of a single man in Wolf Trap. I felt the shadow of his cheek against mine. The moment ached and pulsed for several agonizing moments until the smell of rotten meat wafted up from the floor and I harshly jerked my attention back from fantasy. Perhaps Will would appreciate some of the kidney pie I'd made, I thought.

I will have little time to sleep as it is. Needed at the FBI in the morning. Busy all night. I set to work, as scrupulous and methodical as usual though, if I was honest with myself, lacking in inspiration. Part of me wanted to simply make the excuse that I'd had little time to prepare, that this kill was more impulsive, even more emotional, than others, but I knew in truth, I was distracted. I worried, not for the first time, that Will would, if he hadn't already, begin to compromise my work. It's the sort of compromise I've never had to make with myself. And I worried about this new therapy.

I finished my work as quickly as I could. By the time I had displayed Mr. Caldwell's body in a school bus, it was nearly one in the morning. Looking up into the night sky I saw Orion stretching his bow across the heavens. I said my farewells, taking the usual moment to admire the visuals and bask in the immeasurable feeling of accomplishment, then packed up my things to head home for a few hours of sleep.

I arrived at Quantico later than I'd hoped. After receiving my visitor's badge I made my way to Jack's office. As I did, I couldn't help but remember a similar day, not so long ago, when I'd first met Will Graham in the very same office. I'd been so unprepared for him. My plans had changed then. Perhaps they would change again now. Some things may have to happen sooner than I anticipated.

"Good morning, Jack," I announced after knocking lightly on the doorframe.

“Dr. Lecter,” he was at his desk, surrounded by papers and files, a man convinced of his own relevance in the fight against what he perceived as evil, “Thanks for coming in. Wearing your dancing shoes?” he asked standing up.

Despite the flowery language his words were cinched with trepidation, “I’m more of a private dancer,” I answered, trying to match his good cheer regardless of my fatigue.

“Well, I know this isn’t a typical waltz for you but I appreciate your willingness to consult again on these sorts of cases.”

“Will Graham sorts of cases?”

“Yes,” he conceded, brow furrowed, “They have their own flavour don’t they?”

“They do. However I may be of service, Jack.”

He tugged his jacket from the back of his chair, striding to the side of his desk where I watched his eyes drop to my shoes, “I’ll warn you those shoes may never be the same again. Crime scene is a farm.”

I also cast my eyes downward. Italian leather the colour of a fawn, a perfect match to the autumnal ensemble I’d carefully put together. “I will be better equipped next time.”

“Let’s go,” he said, “I’ll drive.”

We settled into his car and, having been given so few details about the case, I was forced to wonder, with a fair amount of excitement, what sort of crime scene I was going into.

“Have you seen Will?” Jack asked, almost in a casual way, though it was a tone that was difficult for him to achieve with the deepness of his voice and the vein of authority that consistently ran through his words..

“I have.”

“Looking after Winston?”

“My understanding is that Winson’s condition has greatly improved. I believe he is out of the woods.”

“Good,” he sighed heavily, “I didn’t want to stack Will’s troubles any higher than they already are. Not after yesterday.”

“How do you mean?”

“He didn’t tell you about getting into it with Zeller?”

“Getting into it?”

“Zellar took Price's death pretty hard. They were close. Friends, not just colleagues, for years. Took losing him for me to realize just how amazing they were; there was no case they

couldn't solve working together," Jack sighed, "Grief does funny things to a person. Maybe it's not surprising he blames Will."

"That's what they fought about?"

"Among other things. This is exactly why I didn't want Will coming back so soon, why I wanted him to take the time he needed. For all of us to adjust, you know?"

"I highly doubt that Will is, or was, looking for a confrontation with Mr. Zeller."

"I hope not. At least he's been attending his therapy sessions as he was instructed."

I let several moments pass, noting the grey sky around us hindering the dawn as well as the hint of blood under my fingernails, enough for me to notice, if no one else, "I know you were hoping Will would help you catch the Ripper, Jack. I'm sorry it feels like that option is slipping away."

"Part of me knows I wouldn't have stopped," he said, eyes locked on the road, "Whatever it took. However much it hurt him."

"What changed?"

"You know what changed."

His wife. Every day that marched by brought crushing clarity to that fact that there were very few left. The time he'd spend trying to catch the Ripper was time he could never get back. Regret is beyond all others one of the most crippling emotions.

I took a deep breath, "I'm curious. How do you know Dr. Gachet?"

"I knew him, years ago in Pittsburgh, coincidence really that he landed here and was available. Despite what time has passed, I trust his judgment on things, he's a good man."

I did not easily accept coincidences, "Your endorsement of his character sets my mind at ease, Jack, as well as your commitment to Will's mental wellness."

"Better late than never," he said bitterly, "I'll leave it up to Lewis, his professional opinion," a pause, "Maybe it's best we all keep our distance from Will. Give him a chance to piece himself together."

My teeth clenched. I did not, nor would I ever, see Will as broken, "Removing any supportive element from Will's life, especially now, could be detrimental to his lasting recovery."

"You're speaking as his psychiatrist?"

"As his friend."

He considered this. And I considered how much longer I could resist the urge to permanently remove Jack's presence from Will's life. I let the feeling coil within me, hot in my chest, tensing every muscle as he continued, "I can't pretend to understand what it's like for you, in

your profession, losing someone no matter how hard you try to save them. The people I try and save are already dead by the time I get there."

When had Jack written off Will so assuridly? He'd had to cope with a lot, the paradigm he'd constructed around Will's incarceration and his wife's illness, as well as his hunt for the Ripper, was balanced on the edge of a sword, "It is possible to make no mistakes and still fail, Jack."

"I've made mistakes," he said, staring unblinking at the road.

Chapter End Notes

Gold star to those that noticed the "private dancer" remark. Mads said this during an interview. I couldn't help but add it into my story because then that man dances *fans self* Thanks all for reading!

Torn

Chapter Notes

And another, dear readers.

The tide of people shifted, rising with great force against the concrete walls around me. The precarious hope of their typical mass exodus from work to home was interrupted in an all too expected seachange. I felt I was standing on the shore, watching. Away from it all. Something had happened. I stood in the hallway and absorbed the tension of bustling bodies and ringing phones. I felt before I saw Jack coming down the main hallway toward his office. Hannibal was with him. My breathing increased and I felt anger rise at their strange partnership. Hannibal where I should have been. My hand reached behind me to the wall to steady myself for a moment. Reason told me to stay put or go back into my office. Go home as I'd been planning. But I didn't.

Weaving through the fast moving bodies I strode over to them, "What's going on?"

"Will," Jack said as I quickly glanced at Hannibal then back to him. Everyone gave him a wide berth. "It's under control."

"What is? What happened" I demanded.

"A body has been found," Hannibal said to whatever the opposite of Jack's delight was, "It looks like another Ripper kill."

The air rushed from the hallway and I fell back several steps. My eyes went again to Hannibal and something, something comfortable in the places eroded by years of churning water creeped slowly and darkly into the corner of my vision. He met my eyes and there was no trace of challenge or deception. Oddly reassurance. He wasn't gloating. He was telling me everything was going to be okay.

"Jack," I implored, watching him crush his hat in his hands, "I know I can't officially help but let me at least--"

"Not an option," Jack nearly growled, "Go home, Will."

"You don't know what you're dealing with, Jack."

"Don't I?" his tone was booming, a challenge coloured by his years of pursuit.

"Not like me," I implored. He'd dragged me so far. Why stop now?

“Will,” Hannibal interjected, hand raised between Jack and I, “Should we step into your office?”

“I don’t have anything to say to you,” I spat.

“Please,” Hannibal said, “Let’s allow Jack to gather his bearings.”

I looked to Jack and he seemed as solid and immobile as stone. I felt the weight drag heavily on my conviction and I let out a shuddering breath, “Don’t come crawling to me when you have nothing left, Jack,” I turned, quickly striding into my office, dismissed again, disregarded again, left to rot, again. Hannibal followed and calmly closed the door.

I paced in front of my desk, running my hands over my face, whole body shaking, “It wasn’t enough that you were out in the field doing my job while I sit here like an idiot, now there’s another Ripper kill.”

“We just heard over the radio on the ride back.”

“That doesn’t concern you?”

“Concern me? Of course it does. It may be only the first of several kills.”

“Don’t mess with me, Hannibal,” I nearly shouted, hands clenched to fists, “I know. I *know* .”

“Are you sure?”
“Are you serious?” I stopped pacing, voice lowering to a whisper, “You don’t think I can see you? After everything? After all of it. Why?” I insisted, stepping forward, into his orbit, “I thought we were going to be open and honest from now on, didn’t you say that?”
A pause and slow inhale as he considered this, “We are in the halls of the FBI.”

“And? Isn’t that why you were out helping Jack again? You get off on dangling yourself in front of him.”

His tone sharpened somewhat, “You could tell him.”

“I did. Remember? No one believed me. And no one will. Ever.”

“Isn’t that what really upsets you, Will,” he took a half step closer, “You feel as if you are screaming at everyone from a great distance, over a great void. No chance of being heard.”
“No thanks to you,” I said, “My reputation, no matter what it was before, is demolished. I may never get it back.”

“There is freedom in that,” he said.

All I was aware of was the flex of my ribs as they expanded and contracted with each breath, the smell of him, the pull of his energy like sweet sap and the wet warmth of a mudslide. It gathered at my feet. Ground me in place. His eyes scanned my face. I saw them drop to my lips then back to my eyes. I felt his hand raise to my forearm and when he touched me the room shifted from grey to a golden hue. “Don’t touch me,” I said but he didn’t drop his arm, fingers sliding up to my elbow. The physical contact made the connection greater, taking me

far away from the confines of my office. Felt like I was in a wider space, high ceilings, marble and granite in arches above me, air to breathe. The echoes there were only mine and his.

“I can hear you,” he said, “Since the moment I met you I could hear you,” it felt true. It felt staggeringly real as the air seemed to count to ten around us, “How do you feel now, Will?” he asked.

“I feel angry,” my voice shuddered, “You are forcing me to make a choice I can’t possibly make.”

“I believe you can,” he said, “If that choice is fully yours, removed from anger, self-doubt and shame, away from the beliefs about yourself made so long ago and supported again and again by those that can never understand you.”

“You want me to choose sickness? Darkness?”

“You are not sick,” his words took on a low, intimate tone, spoken over a dark field at night, smelling of earth and green and life, “You are extraordinary. It is only in captivity that you pluck your own feathers, ruin your wings against the bars, dull your beak in efforts to escape.”

“Don’t,” I grasped onto him, somehow seeking balance, “Do this to me. Not again.”

He raised his hand to my jaw, fingertips settling on the pulse at my neck then around to the base of my skull, thumb smoothing over the rough stubble on my cheek, “I’m offering you an alternative. Away from fear,” his amber eyes flitted down to my lips again and I was aware he was leaning forward, his lips open, warm like the sun suddenly peeking out from behind a cloud.

I heard his words. Understood what he meant. I knew he was right. I thought I was a monster long before I ever met him. Tried for so long to be someone else. There were no other words to say so that when I leaned into him, breath still coming in shaking huffs, I stretched all my awareness out to him, wrapped it around the two of us like an eddy that swirled deep to fill the spaces created. It was like falling for a moment.

I felt the curls of my hair against his forehead and his breath moist over my lips. Felt his exhilaration added kineticism in every limb, felt my trepidation that was exhaled through his mouth and for a moment we froze, locked to and in each other. I could see myself through his eyes. Sense my own heartbeat through his hands. I suddenly knew how I smelled, how I smelled to him. In one intense, shocking moment I felt his unwavering adoration and pure awe of me stretched between our shared heartbeat.

We were so close, closer than we’d ever been. His fingers curled into my hair as his thumb moved to brush gently against my ear. My body responded in a rush of blood, wanting more than anything in that moment to cross that barrier, taste the impossible. My upper lip barely touched his, brushing lightly over the inviting wetness. In a second I felt him shift toward me, our lips finally meeting in impossible silence, my breath lost on contact and the barest wet

smack of pressure before I shook my head, shifting my feet in the muck and mud, trying to get away.

“No,” I said, closing my eyes, removing my hands from him, “No, no, no,” I fell back against my desk, hand over my mouth, the tendrils of our connection stretching to a breaking point and falling to the ground between us.

“Will,” he said. Sounded almost gentle.

“Hannibal,” I warned, raising my hand, “Leave. Leave me alone.”

He lingered for a moment. I felt a wash of sadness, confusion, pain, the further he moved away the less I felt it. When he finally closed the door behind him I sat fully on my desk, echoes of the dream I’d had flashing through my head. A warm body against mine. The sky stretching above us.

Curious

Chapter Notes

Hannibal's POV

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was several days later at the FBI. The team had reached the inevitable conclusion of my most recent kill; the Ripper, no evidence, no leads. I'd offered what insight I could but had little interest in teasing them. I had other things on my mind.

The coffee cart, just across the street from Quanitinco was a hub of warmth and community even in the cooler weather. The scant offerings, little more than poor coffee and stale looking muffins, was hardly the appeal for those only looking for a moment away from their mundane jobs. They ordered coffee, chatted together, smoked cigarettes. I was only interested in Dr. Gachet standing at the back of the line. In the midst of the crowd I noted his particular smell, cheap Irish Spring soap and a processed foods heavy diet, and imagined stalking him to a dark, remote place, envying him the time he spent with Will, angered at his position so close to someone so dear.

"Hello," I greeted brightly, standing in the queue behind him.

"Dr. Lecter," he turned, surprise raising his eyebrows for a moment, "What are you doing here?"

"I've been consulting on some cases for the FBI of late. And wanted something hot to drink."

"Ah, yes," he eyed me up and down, breath visible as he exhaled, "I'd heard."

"Work not wholly unfamiliar to you I imagine."

"In what way?" he shuffled forward, facing away from me.

"Your history of law enforcement."

"You've been curious about me, Doctor?"

"Jack and I have exchanged words."

"So you know he trusts me."

"He does."

“Good. He’s a man you want on your good side,” he fished out of a worn, discolored wallet that was held together by two different kinds of tape from his pocket and extracted a few dollar bills. Certainly he made better money than that, I mused silently and quickly., trying not to stare Or he is just a man that can’t let things go. He ordered a plain back coffee, told the attendant to keep the change and stepped away from the cart.

I followed him, “I understand you will be unable to discuss any of your work with Will Graham, but I was curious just how much longer I will be needed by the FBI. My practice is my primary focus at the moment and am afraid I can’t commit to any sort of long term arrangement.”

“You want a timeframe?” he took a sip of coffee, grimaced at the heat and took off the lid, letting the steam spill into the cool air.

“Do you have one?”

“He only has five more sessions left. I’ll make my determination then. And at that point I imagine Jack will let you know how much more help he’ll be needing from you.”

“Will Graham is a complicated case. I’m not sure ten sessions are adequate to fairly assess him.”
“You know, those were my thoughts too,” he turned to face me fully, “He’s a very sick man.”

“Regardless of his pathology he is highly functioning.”

“Think so?” he recapped his coffee, taking a sip, “Seems to me he’s suffering. Quite a bit. Ethically, how could I not recommend a level of care appropriate to that level of suffering?” he narrowed his eyes, regarding me, and my silence, with a shallow undercurrent of satisfaction. But why? Was it simply for making it up the hill first, a needless masculine need to better a perceived rival? There was little subtlety in his tone as he said, “As a professional I’m sure you’ve had patients that you regretted not taking more dramatic action on sooner. Are you sure you have the clearest picture of Will Graham?”

“That’s why I value consultation.”

“Not in this case, Doctor,” he said, “And not with you.”

“Why?”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Lecter, I can’t say anymore. Rest assured Will will finally be getting the treatment he needs.”

“It sounds as if you’ve already made your decision,” I said, feeling my jaw strain as I clenched my teeth. Jack trusted this man? He never intended for Will to return to work. He wanted him to be someone else's problem. As I’d feared, outside of my influence the world would destroy him. Try and change him. Imprison him.

“I really can’t say, Doctor,” he smiled slightly, likely astute enough to see the hollows in my cheeks, the dilating of my pupils, “You’ll have to excuse me, I have an appointment.”

He turned and left. To go see Will.

Jack thought I'd back down. Bedilia told me to. My own reason warned me against even consulting with the FBI anymore. Circumstances were pushing Will further and further away from me. Yet I pursued. The familiar, always present urge to stalk and kill, the secret part of myself for no one else to know, see or touch, was focused now to a pinpoint. And it was hungry. I'd pull the light from the stars and leave the night sky an endless void to save him. The flutter of his pulse under my fingertips, the brush of his lips against mine. Dr. Gachet's stood between me and the person I held most dear in this world. He threatened him. Us. Our family.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Hannibal, your fleshy heart is showing.

Remembering

Chapter Summary

Will POV

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Tell me about that time. The first time. When did you first know something was wrong?" Dr. Gachet asked, flipping to a new page in his book after licking his fingertip.

"When the counselor I was seeing picked up the phone in the middle of the session and called the hospital for me to be admitted."

"Based on what you'd told them?"

"She got pale. She seemed to sink back into her chair, into the wallpaper. I sensed she was afraid. Of me. And she wanted me to be locked up."

"Based on violent fantasy?"

"Based on dreams. Thoughts I'd been having. I didn't feel violent. I didn't feel crazy."

"That old cliche that people that are crazy never know they're crazy is a cliche for a reason. Being acutely symptomatic can cause us to lose perspective, not just of ourselves but the world around us. The world becomes a dark, scary place, especially when we are young. We come to expect it, see it everywhere we look; our neural pathways form to see everything that way."

"The world is indifferent to my suffering."

"Does that include your dad?"

"At the time?"

"Yes."

"I knew he didn't understand. I knew he felt helpless. And I didn't want to cause him any more trouble, any more worry than I already had."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'd do whatever it took to make sure he didn't feel like he had to take care of me."

“Don’t you think your dad would have wanted to help you?”

“He would have wanted to but he would have failed.”

“That’s sad to hear.”

“Is it?” I stretched out my awareness to him but felt nothing, as usual.

“When you say that you felt like you had to suffer alone, that no one, not even your dad, could help you, that’s sad. When I’ve heard you say that you’re scared of yourself, of your mind, that you’re afraid of hurting people, that makes me sad.”

“I’ve tried to accept who I am.”

“I know. And maybe some of the past therapy work you’ve done, with Dr. Lecter or otherwise, hasn’t been as beneficial as it could be. You deserve a chance to expect more from your life, don’t you?,” he sat forward, elbows on his knees, “These things you imagine, they aren’t things you’ve actually done, you aren’t guilty of anything, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Mental illness is outside of strength of will, it’s not a matter of trying hard enough, it has no bearing on who you really are,” when I didn’t say anything he titled his head to the side, “You look emotional, Will. What part of what I said is resonating with you?”

“I’m not guilty.”

“No. No you’re not,” he inhaled deeply, “In fact I think you put yourself in those types of situations, situations that are difficult for you, over and over, to punish yourself. Does that feel right to you?”

“What choice do I have? It’s my job.”

“You do have a choice. You could seek out actual treatment for your mental illness. Give it an actual chance. And yes, you could consider not putting yourself in those situations anymore, not for work, or anything.”

“Is that your recommendation?”

“I’m hoping by the end of our sessions it will be yours.”

>>>>>

Back at home. A frost settling deep into the earth. I’d crawled back home after the therapy session and sought only to escape, avoid, deaden the emotions threatening to overwhelm me. Then a knock at my door.

“Beverly. What are you doing here?”
“In the neighborhood,”

“Nobody’s just in my neighborhood.”

“Alright maybe I wasn’t. But no dead bodies have been discovered in the last few hours so,” she held up a six pack and a medium sized pizza box, “Care for some cold pizza and warm beer?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s pepperoni and hot peppers,” she said in a sing-song voice.

“I don’t--”

“Come on, you haven’t been at work.”

“Been working from home.” Partially true. I had been going into work. If just for the appointments with Dr. Gachet. Work has still been at a standstill. And I didn’t want to run into anyone. Like Jack. Or Hannibal. Especially since the last time. Since I’d . . . been emotionally reactive. It was entirely impossible to understand what happened. I was drawn to him. More so now that I knew what it was like. How he tasted.

“One beer, I just want to see how you’re doing.”

“Is that what friends do?”

“Yes,” she said slightly exasperated, sliding past me inside, “And yeh, they usually bring food and or alcohol.”

“Okay,” I sighed, closing the door behind her, “Fine.”

“Hi!” she exclaimed, kneeling to pet the dogs with the pizza raised above her head, “Hey guys!”

Buster made a hapless leap toward the box, making me grab it, and the beer, from her hand and bring them to the kitchen. Winston followed me, tail wagging. He leaned on my legs and I felt him sigh, trying to get me to relax. I'd been pacing around the house for most of the evening, my thoughts cluttering my mind like crumpled up pieces of paper in a bin, scraping and crunching around each other restlessly. In between the whispered words of Dr. Gachet, like a clearing in the woods, I could see myself and Hannibal standing in the sun, free from everything else, when in an instant he’d become something entirely different. Something I could touch. I knew how this worked. I wasn’t unique to any other human being in this respect. It was like getting only a glimpse of something through a crack in the door and wanting more than anything else to fling the door open. Regardless, it confused me. Intrigued me, then circled back again to fear and doubt, to Hannibal and what he’d said, what he’d earnestly meant to say, and back again. I opened two beers and watched as Beverly threw her coat over an armchair and shook out her hair.

“Wow, it’s nice,” she said, looking around, a hand still on Max’s head.

“Nice?” I asked skeptically.
“You’re house. Kind of just how I expected it.”

“Well I’m not used to guests,” I handed her the beer, “Sorry if it’s messy.”

“Hey the only reason my place is ever clean is because I’m not there to mess it up.”

“So, do you normally see other people outside of work?”

“Are you kidding? Price and I were working on our top scores on Buck Hunter at the pub,” she took a swig of beer, then, thoughtfully, “Though not so much after the Hobbs case, really.”

I smiled, “I can’t help feeling that they’d made more exciting drinking buddies.”

“We all need a release valve, one way or another. Not unusual. Homicides or no homicides.”

“Sit, if you want,” I said, motioning toward the chairs.

She sat, drinking more beer, “So why are you working from home?”

“Not really a reason to go in.”

“You don’t get lonely?”

“I have my dogs,” I said, “But I’m used to being alone.”

“You don’t have to be you know,” she said, leaning to pick up a chew toy from the floor, flipping it around her hands until she noticed Zoe’s eyes locked onto it, tongue lolling from her mouth. Beverly tossed it across the room and watched as it was attacked. I’d taken the squeaker out of it, thankfully.

“Which is why you came over?” I suggested as Zoe brought the toy to me, eyes big.

“Sure,” she lifted up a leg on the chair, “It wasn’t wholly altruistic, if I’m honest; work’s been rough, felt like some company.”

“I heard. Another Ripper kill.”

“Yeh there’s that. Typical. No evidence. Grisly. Organs on walk-about.”

“I’m sorry I can’t help.”

“Me too, believe me,” she sighed, “I wasn’t even sure it was him. It was weird. Different somehow.”

My heart rate ticked up a pace, “How?”

“I probably shouldn’t even be talking to you about this.”

“Off the record then.”

“It was sloppy,” she noticed my shocked expression, “Rushed almost. It’s not exactly sunshine and rainbows territory, to consider myself any kind of expert on Ripper cases, but I am, sort of, at this point and this,” she shook her head, “I swear it felt personal.”

“Personal?”

“He was strangled, almost to death. Which is not how the Ripper prefers to kill his victims. And the incisions were intense, not precise, never seen that with him before,” another drink, “Hannibal even said it looked like an angry kill.”

“Angry.”

“Well Hannibal used more words and an elaborate metaphor but yeh. Ripper is a lot of things but I’ve never seen him emotional.”

“Hannibal helped with the case?” I felt his thumb smoothing over the stubble on jaw as I leaned into his touch, eyes closed.

“Sort of. But he’s no Will Graham,” she smiled.

I lowered my gaze, rubbing at the label on the beer with my thumb, “He sees things a little differently than I do.”

“I can’t get a read on the guy. Good looking, well off, insanely well educated in everything from music to I assume tennis or backgammon,” I said nothing, hoping she couldn’t see the flush over my cheeks, “You still see him, after you stopped therapy?”

“Yeh,” I nodded, “Here and there.”

“What’s he like outside of work?”

What looked like stillness wasn’t stillness. No more barriers. He’d stood right in front of me. More human than I’d ever known him to be. The rich smell of leather and sandalwood and sage, the bare, raw, human pulsing of emotion he couldn’t or didn’t want to hide washing over me. The feeling of his lips and how his eyes looked a different colour up close.

I swallowed the mouthful of beer I’d been holding on my tongue, licking my lips and trying to find the word amongst thousands, “He’s . . . warm.”

She frowned briefly, thought for a moment, “Are you not coming into work because you don’t want to run into him?”

“What?”

“I mean, I’m sure there are a lot of reasons not to be at work,” she added, “I get that.”

Beverly, more than anyone knew how to interpret the evidence, she’d reminded me of that once upon a time. I stood up, “I’m hungry. I’m going to get pizza.”

She sighed as I retreated and from the kitchen I heard her say, “Get me some!”

I came back with the pizza and a few more beers.

“I just thought it was Jack,” Beverly said, letting her empty bottle slide to the floor, “He’s been a mess lately. In an out like the wind.”

“Does he meet with Dr. Gachet?”

“Who?”

“The therapist he assigned me, older, sort of buzzed army looking hair.”

“I rarely come upstairs so I don’t know. He is in his office a lot. Or just not there at all. I think he’s just distracted for personal reasons.”

“Maybe.”

She took a bite of pizza, chewed and still had the same smile on her face, “You guys get in a fight?”

“Jack and I?”

“No, Hannibal and you.”

“I don’t think I want to talk to you about that.” I stared at the uneaten slice of pizza in front of me.

“Last time I even got close to getting close to someone I completely unintentionally ghosted them. It’s not a normal job. I don’t have free weekends to go an apple orchard or fucking brunch. And I can’t talk about my job, which is one hundred percent of my life, so, yeh, people leave.”

“You regret working so much?”

“No, no way. And I don’t want to complain either. I made my choices. But someday soon I may have to make another choice. Time waits for no man. I could look up from a corpse one day and ten years could have gone by. I don’t know if it’s worth it some days.”

I finally ate some pizza. My mouth flooded with saliva, responding to the rich grease and salt. My dogs perked up their ears but knew better than to beg.

“He saved Winston’s life,” I said after a while.

“Saved his life?”

“Winston was sick, I panicked and called him, and he came over and probably saved his life.”

“Wow.”

“He does these things, nice things, brings me lunch and says things,” I swallowed, not making eye contact.

“And . . . that bothers you?”

I frowned, concerned I was saying too much, sensing her intrigue surrounding me, picking at the folds in my clothes, “Like I said,” I leaned back, “I’m used to being alone.”

“Maybe he’s just trying to be nice.”

“Maybe,“ I scoffed, “I don’t even know if I have a job. It seems ridiculous even talking about this, “ she took a drink of beer and I felt her back off slightly as I asked, “You think you’ll ever leave the FBI?”

“Until something better comes along. It’d have to be pretty incredible though. I figure I’ll know it when I see it,” she finished her pizza and leaned back, “So you think this therapy is helping?”

I felt my grip tighten on the beer bottle, “Why do you ask?”

“Curious, I guess.”

I paused, feeling the sting of the exposed nerve in the air. Uncertainty crept up my spine and I noticed my chest rise and fall faster, “Did Jack send you?”

“What? No.” she almost laughed.

Suddenly it seemed too strange, too random. Too many people checking on me. Asking about things they shouldn’t ask. Private things. My throat tightened, “He too busy to talk to me directly so he sends you as a peace offering? For what? To ask where he can send my last check?”

“Will, I haven’t even talked to Jack. At least not about anything beyond the usual murder and mayhem.”

“If he’s feeling bad about destroying my career, sidelining me, maybe permanently, he can talk to me about it face to face.”

She hesitated, struggling to understand, I felt her surprise and unease, “I doubt that’s the case. He wishes you were there, that you could help him finally catch the real Ripper, that--”

“I think you should leave.”

“Will,” she tried.

“I’m sorry,” I said, standing up, “I’m sorry, really, I’m just,” her hurt swelled up and crashed into me as a cold wave, “You may just be trying to be a friend, bringing beer and pizza, but just,” I hated that I was saying it, “Stay out of my business,” maybe she was surprised, maybe she had expected to get more from me, catch me off guard, either way I needed her out, “Just leave me alone.”

“Okay,” she stood, picking up her coat, “Fine. I don’t know what I did but fine, I’ll go,” at the door she turned, “Will, you have to trust someone.”

“That’s not you,” I said, closing the door.

Chapter End Notes

And Bev tries, sorry this is a slow burn situation, I'm just posting as I wrote it.

Tension

Chapter Notes

Will know's what he is doing, or well, the reader knows why he is here . . .

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Will,” the exhale was visible on the cold air outside the door. He was standing with his arms wrapped around himself, restlessly shifting from foot to foot, “Are you alright?”

“Can I come in?” he asked, voice shaking.

“Please,” I opened the door all the way, stepping aside to let him in. He tugged off his hat and I was taken aback. He’d cut his hair, short and neat around his neck, only the barest of curls visible at the shorter length. I closed the door, locking it with the immediate feeling of curtains being drawn back to reveal the light of the moon.

“I think I’m, uh,” he paced over the smooth granite floor, hands swinging at his sides, eyes everywhere but on me, “I think I’m paranoid, I’m feeling very uncertain about things.”

“Will, what happened?” I drew in a breath like someone breathes in fire, anticipating how best to defend him.

“Beverly came over, she was asking a lot of questions. A lot. And then I just got to thinking that maybe she wasn’t there as a friend. Maybe she’s just like everyone else.”

I stepped forward enough to draw his attention, ground him to where he was, “Like everyone else?”
“Like she was trying to dissect me, pull me apart,” his shoulders dropped with a shuddering sigh, “I’m sure it really helped my case when I kicked her out of my house.”

His eyes finally met mine and I saw tears at their corners, fear gathered like thorns around him. My home was dark save a single light in the study where I’d been reading. I’d also been in the basement, doing a final onceover cleaning from my recent kill. I was so used to the deep inhale of all my kills at once that the urge to complete my cycle ached deep inside me. I was aware that this fact likely contributed to my heightened aggression, a vigilance poised at the ready as blood sang hot through my veins, “Come inside. Let me make you something to drink.”

He blinked and his eyes wandered, finally taking in his surroundings, “I’m sorry. You’re in your,” he gestured awkwardly at my clothes, pajama bottoms, a soft cashmere sweater, and bare feet, “I wasn’t thinking. You’re getting ready to go to bed.”

“No. Just being comfortable. It was a busy week,” I assured him, shifting my body sideways in invitation, “Please.”

He followed as I walked to the kitchen. Few people saw my house at night. I often privately enjoyed how different the rooms looked at night. Where in the light it was full of curiosities and a careful antique aesthetic, in the darkness the shadows stretched over the walls and all the corners were filled with the unknown. I wondered if Will would notice, or appreciate the apt dichotomy. I switched on the light in the kitchen then turned to see him blink in the doorway at the sudden brightness. “Tea?” I asked, “Or something stronger?” I peeked into the kettle to see if I’d left any water in it.

“Stronger.”

“Perhaps both? Hot toddies to warm our bones,” I filled up the kettle as he took a seat on the stool at the island, running his hands through his hair with a deep exhale.

“You cut your hair.”

“I said I was going to,” he grumbled, running his hand over the back of his neck, “I kinda miss it now though.”

“It looks very nice,” I said with a smile, imagining my nose pressed into the exposed flesh of his neck, dragging my teeth over the soft warm skin. I gathered two mugs, a teapot, a strainer and loose leaf black tea. I dipped my nose into the strong soothing aroma of the tea. A rich, spicy fragrance contrasted against the harsh chemical smell that still coated my hands. I selected a lemon from a nearby bowl and started to slice it into wedges. Licking the sour juice from my fingers I said, “I’ve never known you to experience paranoia. How long has this been going on?”

“Hard to say.”

“Is there a specific person you believe is watching you or does it feel like a more disparate threat?

“Hannibal I don’t need another therapist right now, please.”

“Alright. I will be more direct then,” I set the bottle of whiskey on the counter and took a breath, “I don’t think you are paranoid,” his eyes rose to mine with a painfully hopeful expression, “I think that Dr. Gachet is compromising your recovery and your mental health rather than improving it. He is drawing focus and intensifying what he believes is pathological for his own purposes.”

“His own purposes? What purposes?” his back straightened, eyes wide, “Jack?”

“I don’t know that Jack’s intentions are malicious. Misguided perhaps. Though it’s hard to be sure.”

Will took a moment to process this as I poured the boiling water over the tea leaves. He spoke with a mixture of anger and fatigue, “Does he think this is helping me? Or is he just

trying to expunge me from his exemplary record?"

"Jack has told me he regrets pushing you so far in the past. In his mind he may be making up for lost time. Though I doubt he is aware of Dr. Gachet's particular modality."

"He's sure I'm mentaly ill. He's told me I need to get into treatment," his hand tightened around the empty mug as I rested my hip against the counter, "That if I don't I'll hurt people," his eyes were filling with tears again, several stretching moments of silence passing before he brought forth the words, "I worked so hard to get here, to the FBI, everything I have, when it would have been so much easier to just--" he shook his head, eyes closing, "And now it's all falling apart. Maybe I should," eyes opened, "Maybe I should just accept that I'm," he thought for a moment, shoulders hunched, lower lip caught in his teeth. I watched his expression change slowly as a creeping almost rhythmic anger tightened his jaw and he shook his head, "I told him about my childhood," his words came stiff and broken by the bite of his teeth, "I told him about my dad. I told him about when I was first hospitalized," anger crackled in the air around him, it raised goosebumps over my arms, "I told him about my dreams."

"He was trained to extract information as part of his job," I finished his drink, squeezing a wedge of lemon into the mug before pushing it over to him.

"As a therapist?" he took a tentative sip, then blew lightly on the steaming surface.

"Law enforcement."

"You looked into him?"

"I did. Your safety is important to me."

"Find anything else out?"

"Not much. A former employer described him as a bloodhound."

"It fits. He almost seems to enjoy it."

"He probably does."

"And I fell for it," Will swallowed hard then, abandoning his drink he stood up and began to pace around my kitchen as if being in motion was necessary in order to process, "It makes me furious."

"Yes I know," I said, watching him move around me, "I can feel it in you."

"You're the empath now?" he asked from over his shoulder, hands resting briefly on his hips.

"I feel it as well. I've thought about killing him."

He stopped pacing, turning to face me, "Are we talking in the metaphorical sense?"

"No," I said honestly.

Fear urged me to stay where I was, stay hidden, but desire and growth, in the way something grows painfully in a small confined space, urged me forward into the terrifying unknown. Instinct demanded of me obedience. But growth demanded disobedience. With some trepidation I allowed my barriers to drop, imagining myself stepping from a door into an empty field. I was made dizzy by the abrupt and tremendous expanse of space, away and removed from the protection of my mind. It was painfully bright. Automatically my eyes began to adjust to the looming sky and remarkable remoteness, the loneliness I'd feared and avoided. And then I saw him.

The wind rushed cold through the tall grasses as Will walked toward me. I watched him approach. Details came into focus. The longer he walked the better he walked. He was adjusting himself. He was learning to calculate his muscular movements, to know his physical limitations, to measure distances between objects and himself. When he finally reached me, hackles raised on the back of his neck I could almost see the warm blood running from his mouth, hear the gnashing of teeth. His heartbeat sounded in the stillness like music, "I'm angry that he would do this to me. Like you did. I'm angry that he got into my head. I'm angry because I know that nothing will be the same again," he came to stand close to me, the early morning light of the field warming his face, "He made me feel powerless."

"You are far from powerless, Will."

"I can't exactly kill my therapist. Seems like the fastest way to end up right where he wants me."

I looked into the bright blueness of his eyes, so much like the sky above us, and felt as if we were the only living things, needing to devore the world in order to continue to live, "One cannot violate the truth of one's nature without having that nature recoil upon itself."

His voice lowered to a whisper, "Would you do it?"

"Is that how you imagined it?"

He shook his head slowly.

"Show me," I said, "Show me how you imagined doing it."

He edged closer, pupils dilating as I sensed the warmth of his body, so close to mine, the smell of perspiration and tense muscles rising to my nostrils. His posture and the feverish intensity of his emotion made my heart race, blood pumping hard into a deep and cavernous arousal. I wanted him to show me. I wanted him to touch me. Like we had before. Like I'd always wanted. Simply and humanly in all that flesh and bone had to offer.

He said nothing, breaths coming in short, sweet gasps as his hand rose to my collar bone, moving with curious purpose up to the heat of my throat. Yes, Will, I thought, begging him silently to see the exposed flesh, my exposed heart as only he could see it, see me as I was, see, feel, how much I wanted him. The movement made me raise my chin, lips parted as his fingers tightened. He could no doubt feel my pulse thundering under his palm. My eyes fluttered half shut, a small noise escaping my throat as his fingers tightened. He held me there for a few moments, maybe to see what I'd do, maybe to see what it felt like. I kept still, arms

at my side, fighting the urge to touch him. I knew it was dangerous but felt all my reason unseated by the blind yearning of the flesh to exist.

Will's hand slid from my throat slowly up over my chin, past my jaw, thumb lightly running over my lower lip as I watched him exhale heavily with fascination. I let him move his hand to the back of my neck, eyes flickering up to mine. I pulled him toward me and our foreheads touched as we panted over each other's mouths, the smell of earth and sky carried with the wind around us. As the sun rose over us, dazzling the dew covered grasses it dominated me, the need for it, the expression of my existence. Life's potencies that had languished and well near perished.

I closed my eyes and breathed deep the smell of him, sweetened by the unmistakable scent of arousal. I slid my hands under his jacket, over the front of his shirt, over the thin, taunt body I'd only dreamed about, tilting my head forward to finally bring our lips together, ellicating a gasp from us both. He melted into me, my arms wrapping around him to settle on his lower back, stretching over his spine as the rolling wetness of his tongue came past my lips and a sweet, deep moan ran deep through his bones. He kissed me fiercely and tasted like whiskey and lemon. Pulled at my clothes. Shuddering beautiful yearning. I pushed at the collar of his jacket, making it fall from his shoulders, breaking the kiss only long enough to find the exposed skin below his ear, sliding my tongue over his pulse to hear the broken groan it caused. Pulled me closer until our hips met, small bucking movements as his breathing hastened, finding and kissing me again. The jacket hit the floor and he pulled back with a wet smack of our mouths.

The dawn light slowly faded into the light of my kitchen, darkened windows, the hum of the refrigerator and Will standing before me, a flush over his cheeks, lips swollen, the course burning from his beard over my chin.

"Okay," he said breathlessly, "Okay," he lowered his eyes, clearing his throat.

"Will," I said, hands lowering my hands to rest on his hips where his blood raged, my fingers aching to touch bare skin.

"No," he said, his own hands running down my back, grasping, as he nuzzled into my neck like a dog, lips briefly finding contact with my skin as my nerves lighted and spread like fire across my body, "Don't talk."

How far did he want this to go? Did he want what I wanted? How much was I willing to risk? What did he need?

I took his hand, guiding him from the kitchen into the study, to the couch covered in several blankets and books. He looked hesitant for a moment more, standing with dilated eyes and the outline of an erection at the front of his trousers, before I took his hands and placed them on my chest. His fingers searched and found my bare hot skin under my collar, eyes flickering up to mine in the dim light, before grasping the bottom of my sweater and tugging it up. I pulled it off in one movement and watched as he took a step back, eyes taking in my body, fingers fumbling to undo a few buttons of his own shirt, throwing it to the ground before coming back to me, finally skin on skin, pushing me to the couch. He crawled on top of me, hips thrusting into me as he kissed me again. I arched myself up into him, wedging my

thigh between his legs to meet the insistent hardness there. He broke the kiss to slide his tongue down my neck, down my chest, fingers carving into the thick hair, finding a nipple and biting it before his hand tentatively reached down to touch my cock, making me jerk uncontrollably, He marveled at the reaction and squeezed, watching as my eyes rolled back in my head, moaning in need of more contact.

He leaned back to pull at the drawstring of my pants and I stopped him. My hand shot to his wrist and he looked up in alarm then down to the twitch of my cock underneath the wet fabric. No Will, I thought, you first in everything. I shifted quickly, surprising him with the agility as I pushed him backward into the cushion, sliding on top of him, hands working at his belt, freeing his erection in one quick movement. When it was free and my hand found it he hissed, gasping in one, two, three, breaths then a long moan as I pumped it's length from base to tip, teeth biting and sucking at the soft skin of his neck. The keening, begging noise he made was enough for me to feel myself drip and strain with a sharp thrust to his leg, almost awkwardly into his hip bone.

I kissed down his chest, god the smell of him was so rich, the sound of his heart against his ribs enveloped me in the realness of him. Closed my eyes, wanted to know him only through touch, taste and smell. I ran my tongue up the underside of his cock, feeling him shudder and shake under me, hearing him whine in need. I cast my eyes upward to look at him, head thrown back, mouth open before I wrapped my lips around the head of his cock, circling the sweetness with my tongue as I reached down with my other hand and cupped his balls, waiting for the sounds to become desperate before taking the entirety of him into me, down my throat, sweet and thick and perfect.

The taste of leaking precum erupted over my tongue as he gasped, "Oh god," he moaned, "Uh, nuh, fuck fuck fuck," he set the pace for me with his hips, hands in my hair. Noted every sound, every twitch as my mouth took him in and out, lips and tongue curious at every jerk, every exhale. The pressure of his blood, of his arousal, made his cock swell around my lips. I gorged myself on his taste and wanted desperately for his cum to fill my mouth. Faster Will, cum for me Will, I thought as I felt him start to shudder, muscles jerking and twitching. The sweet pulse and throb of his cock started from somewhere deep within and his hips rose as he thrust his cock deep inside me, "Hannibal, ah, oh god, I'm going to--" closed my eyes and pulled him deep into my throat as a hard stop and a small jerk then shuddering silence as hot semen flooded my mouth. I swallowed greedily. The groan that left him was almost pained, pleasure and intensity and wonder in every shaking moment. I slid my hands up his stomach over his chest, not letting him go until his hips lowered and let his spent cock slipped from my lips with a final swipe of my tongue. I looked up at him. His eyes were closed, mouth open, a red flush over his chest.

I was breathing hard, hips making small desperate movements against him. His eyes opened, lashes wet, finding mine. His stomach muscles tensed and he sat up drawing my mouth to his, licking deep into my mouth perhaps to taste himself. His hand snaked down to grasp me through the soft fabric, mouth wide and wet in surprise at the size. His eyes searched mine and then he yanked the fabric down, a bare, spit wet hand finding the aching red flesh. I was close. Very close. I collapsed into him as he tightened his fist around me, pumping into the warmth of his fist, each thrust making me gasp and moan in desperation. He stopped suddenly and I made a pathetic sound, finding his eyes which were hot with desire and he

lowered himself back down onto the couch. I watched as he raised one arm over his head as the other tugged at his already half hard cock. He arched his back and closed his eyes halfway as I straddled those hips, the hot length of my cock over him. The image of him laying before me, pleasuring himself, was too much. He threw his head back and I started to stroke myself vigorously, watching the his wet lips part, listening to the slick sound of his hand over his cock. Just a moment, I thought, I'll mark you, shaking, grunting with pleasure. When Will's eyes rolled up to meet mine I fought to keep my eyes open as in a jerking, lost motion my whole body spasmed and my orgasm came hard and fast, "Will," I panted, "Uhhhhh-nuh," my hot cum jetted onto his chest as I kept thrusting through the ecstasy. I fell onto one arm, unable to hold myself up as the orgasm ripped through me and felt his hand come up to caress my jaw and run through my hair as my hand weakly left my cock.

When I came to rest on his chest his arms wrapped around me. I kissed his chest and we both caught our breath. By the time we moved at all, saturated in and on each other, the semen had dried and stuck our skin together.

"Maybe," he said, chest rising smoothly and calmly under me, "That wasn't such a good idea."

I stiffened, which he certainly sensed.

"Sticky," he said to clarify, shifting to stretch out his legs with a sigh.

"I'll get something to clean you up," I said, shifting to stand as he ran his hand over his stomach where I'd marked him. I walked naked to the kitchen and dampened a towel. How strange the moments were after such intensity, like after a kill when everything is silent. I took a moment, a fearful moment, to see if the pain and unrest would return, springing forth from the void to press it's emptiness against such abundance, waiting for the ceaseless gnawing hunger to creep forward. Could they coexist? I desperately wanted them to. Because now, he could truly hurt me.

I returned to the couch and lowered myself to my knees to wipe the warm cloth over his stomach before handing him the towel so he could clean his hands.

"Come to dinner tomorrow," I said, following his movements until he swung his bare legs over the side of the couch. I loved the newness of seeing and knowing his bare skin, perhaps I would never tire of it. I never wanted to return to a time when I didn't know what he looked like here, privately, just the two of us laid bare.

"Tomorrow?" I saw a weight return to his shoulders for an instant.

"I have a surprise for you."

His eyes met mine for a moment, flickering down and back again with a reluctant caution. His next words sounded like he was reading them from a page, something between obligation and quiet vulnerability, "More surprising than this?" a weak smile.

I considered this for a moment, licking my lips, "To me as well," I said, following his lead, watching with rising concern as he searched the ground for his clothes.

He stood, shivering slightly as he pulled on his pants quickly, as if I hadn't already seen him naked, "I better go," he pulled in his jeans and pulled up the zip, clearing his throat, "The dogs."

"Will," I said quietly as he picked up my jumper, put it down, found his and tugged it over his head, "You don't have to run from this."

He ran his hands through his hair and shook his head, lips pressed together, "I'm not," his eyes bounced back to me briefly, cautiously, his cheek flushing pink before he took a step forward, "I'll see you tomorrow," he leaned in to kiss me, lingering for a moment over my lips. When he turned to leave his hand slid down the bare skin of my stomach grasping my bare hip for a moment before stepping away. He was out the door quickly, leaving me in the changed darkness, air thick with the smell of us.

This hadn't been a surprise, for either of us, regardless of what he felt he needed to say. When I crawled into bed his smell was still all over my skin. I imagined him there in my arms, my nose pressed to the nape of his neck. I had to get up early. I had a drive ahead of me and plans to set into motion.

Chapter End Notes

And then we get vulnerable Hannibal . . . this is hard for him, maybe harder than it is for Will. It feels very real to me. Thanks for reading, let me know what you think, good or bad.

Dinner

Chapter Notes

Did I cry writing this chapter? Yes. Will's POV.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When I woke up the next morning I realized I hadn't set an alarm. What time was it? Groaned and stretched, eyes taking a while to adjust, blinking at the brightness. The sun? It was past sunrise. The dogs, hearing my movement all came rushing into the bedroom whining and clamouring onto or around me. Buster and Winston jumped onto the bed, both licking my face then lying on top of me with contented huffs. I shifted, throwing my arm over my eyes and sighed deeply as Winston licked near my ear. Did they smell Hannibal on me? I knew I should get up. Take them out. But I was relaxed. Actually relaxed. My body didn't feel tingly or aching or tense. A song I'd heard on the radio the day before played at a low volume in my head and not much else. God, when was the last time I slept past sunrise?

Buster rolled onto his back and I lazily scratched his stomach. Small images, sounds, smells, came slowly back to me. I kept my eyes closed, remembering the sight of Hannibal between my legs, his broad shoulders braced to either side of me. I felt him kissing the inside of my thigh and his hot breath over my cock. Heard him moan, deep and rich, head thrown back, mouth open, straddling my hips. Fuck. I was hard. Let my hand trace down my body to grip my erection with a soft grunt. Heard my name on his lips. Felt those lips slide over the head of my cock. Fuck. His tongue. God. My eyes shot open and I saw Buster and Winston staring at me. Dropped my hand away from myself and pushed them away. The others were starting to get impatient, small barks and more whines were going to make this impossible. Okay, I thought, focusing on anything but how much I wanted to jerk off. Took a deep breath.

"Okay," I said out loud, making them all jump up and run toward the front door before I could even get out from under the covers. Winston remained behind, staring at me, "What?" I asked him, "I'm human," I explained in defense against his questioning gaze, standing up as he swooshed his tail back and forth.

I let the dogs out and put on some coffee. Standing at my kitchen counter I scratched at my groin, pubic hairs tangled with dried semen. First step coffee, I thought, then shower. And no work. Fuck that today.

Instead I milled around the house, filling in the quiet morning with odd jobs and random unfinished projects I'd been meaning to get to. In the afternoon I took a long walk with the dogs and got back to the house with the strange, definitely infrequent urge to iron. I had no idea what sort of dinner I'd be walking into tonight but felt pressure to be some sort of presentable. He'd seen me naked. He'd seen me cum. Did he really care about a wrinkled

shirt at this point? Probably, I conceded, taking out the dusty ironing board from it's cupboard in the wall.

Maybe I should have thought about Dr. Gachet sooner but I blamed my not oft sexed brain for that. I felt clearer at least on what had been happening over the last month. After realizing that in all likelihood Dr. Gachet was enthusiastically reserving my place in a padded cell for the good of all people allowed me the space to reconsider a few things. I knew intellectually that I'd not been in a great place when I first started seeing him. He'd known that, more than that, he'd wormed his way into my deepest insecurities about myself, because he was good at it, because it was his job, because maybe Jack told him to.

And yeh, I knew that the rage I felt for Dr. Gachet was likely residual rage from the grease fire that was Hannibal fucking with my head all last year. It was impossible not to consider that. If it was so easy for him, for both of them, to do this, what did that mean about me? If I stopped hating myself, hating those parts of myself that I felt needed to be hated, needed to be ashamed of; would this stop? If I listened to the things Hannibal said, if I made that choice, my choice, not his, not anyones; would this stop?.

Rage. Different from anger because it felt indelibly tied to something deeper, truths I held hard and fast to my very existence, the values I held most dear, had settled like a dark red dye in the fabric of my mind. People don't do that to other people, people don't usurp, abuse, crush a person's free will, make them distrust everything they're thinking or feeling, make them feel broken and wrong and diseased; they don't do that. I thought about killing him. That fact, in itself, isn't revolutionary, I think about killing a lot of people. But considering actually doing it, feeding that part of me; that was a new feeling. And it was hungry, scrapping, clawing, aching to be let out. Hannibal knew what that was like. He knew very well. And if I hadn't known before, been afraid to realize it before, I felt in my bones that he adored me. All parts of me. He didn't want to change me. He wanted me to stop trying to change myself.

I finished ironing a pink, salmon coloured shirt, maybe the nicest I had. I gave a hard pass to ironing any of my trousers. That's just ridiculous.

I dressed, grabbed a bottle of wine and got in the car for the drive to Hannibal's. On the drive I thought about a few things. One was if we would talk about Dr. Gachet. The part of me that wanted to kill him crouched in the shadows, saliva dripping from curled back lips, claws shredding the wallpaper, waiting. Did I need Hannibal to tell me to do it? No. Did I need to know he would protect me?

I also thought about if I should kiss him. When he opened the door should I just kiss him, casually, easily, quickly. Lean into him, maybe put my hands on his hips, linger in the open door, licking the sweet pout of his upper lip, fall back into the depthless pool of his desire and inhale the almost unbearable singularity. Or not. Was kissing him presumptive somehow? Maybe we weren't there. Maybe I could hold onto denial for an indeterminate amount of time and inevitably come to the same conclusion regardless. I never really thought about my body. It was something that hurt mostly, something useful, something that required maintenance, food, water, jerking off now and again. But I rarely stepped inside of it. Inside is where it pulsed and beat and thundered with chaotic energy. Like what I felt in Hannibal. Except he

wasn't chaotic. Suddenly the whole line of thinking was impossibly immature and annoyingly insecure and if I could I would have gripped it by its nape and dragged it outside into the cold.

"Good evening, Will," Hannibal said at the door, stepping back. He was wearing a plain white shirt and grey trousers, apron already on.

"Hi," I said, stepping past him, missing the first chance to kiss him, watching a smile hint over his lips. He closed the door and I stood for beat, missing the second chance, holding out the bottle of wine.

"It's from my private collection," I told him awkwardly.

"Thank you," he said and casually, easily, quickly, leaned in to place a light kiss on my lips. It's soft, sweet. A hand briefly stroked the scruff of my face as he took the bottle from me, "Thoughtful of you."

"Yeh well," I said, rubbing at the back of my neck and trying to hide the flush that had spread up from my chest, "You're lucky if it cost me twenty bucks."

He turned toward the kitchen, "It's rarely the wine itself but rather the company with whom you drink it that has true value."

I followed, throwing my coat on a chair and smoothing my hands over the front of my shirt. It'd been so long since I'd been intimate with someone. As I watched him I couldn't help but think of him naked. Was that normal? Why did it seem incredibly indecent knowing how much hair spread across his broad chest, always hidden under collared shirts and waistcoats. No, not indecent. Criminal. I wanted to be the only one to see it, feel it, know it. Was I? I shook that feeling away, slightly shocked at the possessiveness, maybe I'd been spending too much time with my dogs over the last ten years. It felt animalistic, instinctual.

The kitchen smelled incredible, a mixture of savoury and sweet, lit not from harsh overhead fluorescent lights but several warm lamps that cast it all in a golden hue.

Hannibal returned to his cutting board and reached for a wine opener which he handed to me, "Do you mind?"

I wordlessly stood next to him, taking the bottle opener in answer and peeled away the stiff maroon wrapper. With the cork to my nose I asked, "What's for dinner?"

"Something simple. I was very busy today. Pork chops with fig and grape agrodolce and," he held up his knife and a small purple cabbage looking vegetable, "Radicchio salad."

"Busy with what?" I asked, moving to grab a few wine glasses.

"Preparations."

"For the surprise?"

"Yes," he nodded, accepting the glass of wine from me.

I studied his face and watched him sniff and take a small sip of wine. He'd closed himself off. Or tried to. Hard to do with me. There was a small hint, a tease of excitement like the edge of a sticker your short fingernails can't quite catch onto. He is thrilled. The very sensation of walking into the brightest sun, jumping from a dock into clear cool water, it bled into the air around him. I took a gulp of wine, "Am I going to have to wait?"

"No," he finished chopping and was mixing all he'd chopped in a large bowl. He wiped his hands on a towel before turning to face me, taking one of my hands. The moment he touched me, eyes locking to mine I felt my senses sharpen into focus as his words sounded like a deep purr, "Though I will ask you to prepare yourself," a piece of hair fell in front of his eyes as he tilted his head down, taking hold of my other hand.

"Okay," I said, confused.

Eyes still on me he called over his shoulder, "You can come in now,"

I frowned, "Wha--" my eyes shifted at movement from the doorway.

Abigail.

She came into the light slowly, hands collapsed together, shoulders high as my mouth dropped open. Her hair was shorter, cut to just around her chin and she somehow looked even younger than when I first met her all that time ago lying in blood on the kitchen floor. But it was unmistakably her.

"Abi--" my throat seized shut and I felt myself start to shake, Hannibal's hand moved to my lower back to support me as in an instant I wasn't sure I could stand, "Oh my god,"

"Surprise," Abigail said with a smile, tears in her eyes.

"How?" I gasped.

"Abigail's life did end in Minnesota. After, she was free to start over," Hannibal voice but I couldn't take my eyes off of Abigail, if I blinked she'd go away again.

"You're alive," I managed somehow.

"Yep," Abigail said, tears starting to stream down her face.

I realized I was crying too as she jumped forward to hug me. I wrapped my arms around her, Hannibal's hand still on my back.

"Oh my god, where have you been? Are you alright?" I asked into her shoulder.

"I'm okay, I'm good," she pulled back, clearing her face of tears with a swipe of her sleeve, "Hannibal had me staying at this house of his. It's on a bluff. Kind of in the middle of nowhere. I've been there ever since. And hey look," she reached into her pocket, and pulled out a pair of glasses and slipped them on her face, "Got the idea from you. Part of my secret identity," she smiled, "Though there's no prescription, just glass."

“Hannibal,” I said, breathlessly, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It wouldn’t have been safe. For either of you. I needed to wait until the time was right.”

“And now?” I asked, finally looking at him.

“Now is the right time,” he smiled and his hand ran up my back.

“Don’t be mad at Hannibal, really, he was right, I wasn’t going to make it as Abigail Hobbs,” Abigail said, with a strange matter-of-fact sound to her voice.

“I’m not mad,” I said glancing at her quickly, then back to Hannibal, “This,” clearing my throat, “This changes everything,” He’d brought Abigail back to me. To us. He’d brought her back to me. Acceptance was forming agonizingly slow in my mind, gathering like clouds as I helplessly stared at the man in front of me, wanting, needing to understand, to expel a heart full of pain and guilt. Hannibal raised a hand to my face and tenderly stroked my tears away, “This is what I’m offering you. A family.”

“Hannibal,” I heard Abigail say, “Is something burning?”

Hannibal didn’t move an inch, eyes locked to mine as he asked her, “Would you stir the agrodolce, please, Abigail?”

I noticed her moving to the stove but couldn’t focus on anything but Hannibal, his eyes the burning centers of an impact crater as I scrambled to climb the scorched earth. She wasn’t dead. I hadn’t killed her. Hannibal hadn’t killed her. A family.

Strange in these moments when everything seems to move so slow, moments passing like eternities, the desperate clamoring of a mind trying to find solid ground. And I found it. Found it in the boundless, harmonic depths of his eyes, eyes full of adoration, devotion, and unimaginable certainty. A soft joining of lips and his eyes closed, light spilling forth from the domed ceilings of his mind.

Seemingly from a distance Abigail said, “I think it’s done.”

We fell away from each other, my hand went to my lips and Hannibal joined Abigail. Behind me I heard him talking softly, instructing her to remove it from the burner and taste it quickly, his voice low and patient. This was real. She was alive.

I felt Hannibal’s hand on my shoulder, “Dinner is ready. Shall we?”

“Can I have a glass of wine?” Abigail asked.

“Of course,” Hannibal said and at my sudden eye contact his lips pursed, “A glass at dinner is hardly a crime.”

Abigail and I went to the dining room with our wine as Hannibal finished our plates. She sat down and tucked her hair behind her ears, “I missed you, Will,” she said.

“You have no idea,” I managed, taking a shaky drink of wine.

“Everything just happened so fast. Last time I saw you you were so sick, Hannibal told me that you had encephalitis, that you were in prison, then you got out; I wanted to contact you, just to let you know I was okay; it sounded so awful for you but,” she shrugged helplessly, eyes dropping to her wine glass which she spun in small circle, “I trusted he knew what to do.”

“He told you we’d be together again?”

“Yeh, eventually,” she took a drink of wine, “And it wasn’t so bad, at least not until I convinced him to buy me an Xbox.”

A well timed Hannibal entered the dining room, carrying our plates, “She was very persistent.”

“I *read* all the books,” she said defensively, then looked at me, “He gave me *so* many books.”

“Classics everyone should read at least once,” Hannibal said, sitting down.

“Moby Dick?” Abigail questioned with a raised eyebrow.

He nodded, fork and knife raised over his plate, “A literary masterpiece. And far more humorous than people give it credit.”

“He’s going to say the line now,” Abigail said, putting her napkin in her lap.

“It’s better to sleep with a sober cannibal than a drunken Christsitan.”

I couldn’t help but smile, despite how strange this all was, despite the fact that I was just barely comprehending that I was sitting at dinner with Hannibal and Abigail, who wasn’t dead, somehow managing a casual tone about books he’d forced her to read after faking her own death. A giddy lightness began to ease the tension in my heart and I asked, “That was in Moby Dick?”

“It was,” Hannibal said, returning my smile, “Ishmeal and Queequeg enjoyed a unique friendship before their ill fated voyage.”

“I had no idea,” I said, “Considering how much time I spent on boats as a kid you think I would have read it.”

“Did you live on a boat?” Abigail asked with intrigue.

“For awhile,” I said, mind drifting back to moldy walls and damp Corn Flakes, “It was far from glamorous, believe me,” I took a bite of meat, it was delicious and bathed in a sweet sauce. It’d been a year on the house boat, a year before we couldn’t afford the upkeep or the slip anymore. Frozen winters, sweltering summers. The year a concerned teacher had called CPS. Hadn’t thought about it in a long time, “Sometimes I do miss the water, though.”

Hannibal, maybe noticing my preoccupation, said, “I spent six months working on a fishing boat in Norway.”

“You *do* know how to fish!” Abigail said with satisfaction perhaps alluding to some past conversation they’d had, “I knew it.”

“It was a crab boat,” Hannibal corrected.

“A crab boat?”

“I was laying low,” Hannibal explained, “I learned a lot. Surprisingly least of all about crabs,” he raised his glass of wines to his lips, inhaling softly, “Bad tempered creatures. Ultimately I couldn't stand the smell.”

“Did you have a beard?” I asked, a smile creeping across my face as I tried to imagine what that would have looked like. Rugged Hannibal.

He raised his chin and ran a hand over his throat as if remembering the feel of it, “ I did.”

“Well, you already look tragically Scandanavian, I’m sure you fit right in,” I teased and Abigail laughed.

“An attractive people,” Hannibal nodded, candle light dancing in his pupils.

“They are,” I agreed, directing a faint smile at him.

“Though to be honest,” he gave an exasperated sigh, “They tasted like fish.”

“Oh is that where we are?” I scoffed, wine glass raised to my lips, “Casual references to cannibalism?”

“In for a penny,” he smiled warmly at me.

“Well I can’t imagine you in a pair of jeans, let alone rubber dungarees,” I heard Abigail say, seemingly very amused. I managed to stop staring at Hannibal and try and act like an adult. The combined elation from all of us was intoxicating. Abigail took another drink of wine then exclaimed, “Oh! I technically have a different name now; Ebba.”

I raised an eyebrow at Hannibal, “Ebba?”

“She picked it out. It means strength,” he provided.

“It’s the name I used when I was applying for schools in Europe,” Abigail said excitedly.

“Europe?”

“I’ve always wanted to go and it’s way safer than staying in the US. I’m so excited. Though I haven’t decided where I’m going to go yet. Hannibal seems really set on Denmark for some reason.”

I looked to Hannibal, “She’s leaving?”

A pause the space of a few pregnant breaths, “ *We* could leave.”

“He’s got papers for you too,” Abigail said with a smile, but she was starting to pick up on the tension, “For all of us,” she looked to Hannibal, then to me, “I thought he’d told you.”

I looked quickly to Abigail, then back to Hannibal who was watching me carefully, “Yeh,” I swallowed, adding as much reassurance to my voice as I could, “Yeh he did. Though he was more focused on all the museums he wanted to show me rather than schools.”

“All schools have their own merit; it’s up to the student to apply herself,” Hannibal said so casually I nearly bit my fork in half. He’d had all this time with her. Time to be a father.

“Hey, how’s Dr. Bloom?” Abigail asked.

Again refocused, “She’s good, so far as I know,” I said, “Cashed in on a fair amount of PTO almost a month ago on the way to some place with white sand and palm trees.”

“Wow, good for her,” Abigail’s good cheer faltered somewhat, “I wish I could see her at least one last time.”

“Scuttlebutt says she met someone,” I said, “It’s new. But she seems happy.”

“So much has changed,” her eyes shifted up to us both, lashes fluttering with a sharp inhale, “I was standing still and everything went on without me.”

“Things can’t not change,” Hannibal said.

“That’s a double negative,” she pointed out.

“My favourite one,” he said, “Every living thing is in a constant state of change from birth, even past death. Nature itself is in constant flux. There’s comfort in knowing that no one is standing still and nothing is ever the same.”

We finished dinner. Discussed a few video games Abigail had played. I told her about Winston’s recovery. Hannibal told a story from his time in Norway and it all seemed so peaceful. Comforting. Idelic. Like Dorthy first stepping out of a sepia world into vivid colour. A strange family. A concept I was never really clear on. But this. This worked. Somehow. Inexplicably. This felt like home. And throughout I would catch Hannibal looking at me, small contented glances through candlelight, licking sauce from his lower lip, smiling at Abigail’s excited chance to catch me up on her life, humming his obvious satisfaction at a meal shared without pretense, without any outward display.

Abigail helped us clean up and then Hannibal showed her to a spare room. She was exhausted, told me she hadn't slept the night before because she’d been so excited to see me again. While Hannibal was upstairs I helped myself to some scotch, gulping one glass down before he returned and poured myself another. No time for sipping.

I felt Hannibal before I saw or heard him. He lingered, watching me in the shadows.

“Nightcap?” I asked.

“Please,” he said and I poured him an indeterminate amount in an identical crystal tumbler and handed it to him.

“I think I’m still in shock,” I said as I raised the crystal to my lips, holding the liquid in the spoon of my tongue before saying, “You could have told me.”

“I wanted to, believe me,” a hint of longing lilted his words.

“You had this all planned out?”

“I was hoping. And things coalesced in a way that made the opportunity too perfect to ignore,” he took a tentative sip.

“And suddenly here I am, at the precipice of a choice. You kept talking about choice, about how I had to choose. I thought we were done with manipulation, Hannibal.”

“I did. And we are. I won’t force you either way.”

I stepped forward, “But now I’ve slept with you. Was that part of the plan?”

“No,” he said flatly.

“Just a happy byproduct?”

He set down his glass, “I won’t deny my affections for you. And I’d hoped you wouldn’t deny your own.”

“Again, hoping,” I scoffed, finishing my drink to rub a hand over my eyes, “You’re a very hopeful person.”

“You grieved for her loss. Constructed a reality where she no longer existed. This is an undeniably jarring experience.”

“Grieved alone apparently.”

He paused, eyes dropping to run over my body, nostrils flaring slightly like he was scenting me, “I knew of no other way.”

I paused within the space of several shuddering breaths and whether it was the scotch or my nerves racked across the coals I felt that anger falter, bend and twist like something in a flame, crumpling into the final words of acceptance, “She’s alive.”

“Yes. And we can be there for her, allow her the chance to thrive as her father never could.”

“I want to be mad at you. I want to be angry but I--,” I stopped, feeling the swell of his heart, smelling the heat from his body rise as echos and glimmers of the wordless truth assembled in front of me, “Things are different now,” l closed my eyes, “For a lot of reasons,” I opened my eyes and saw him standing in front of me, space bending and turning into him, “And I have to choose what happens next.”

“What’s in your heart?” he asked quietly, a staggering amount of vulnerability weighing his words deep in his chest.

“I don’t want you to go away,” I said shakily. I want you. I want to go with you. I can’t imagine my life without you in it. Not anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Ebba is the name of the daughter of a character Mad's played in Exit. A good movie, though I'm incapable of calling any movie he's done bad. Thank all for reading, leaving comments and kudos, it truly warms my heart at the beginning of this new lockdown where many, like myself, face it living alone and isolated. To anyone else in a similar situation, as always, my thoughts are with you all, thank goodness we have the Fannibal community.

Joined

Chapter Notes

You guessed it, smut. Hannibal's POV.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His scent changed in just an instant, the heat of anger and defensiveness burning away into a focused and consuming single mindedness. Since the moment he'd walked in the front door he'd circled me, watched my movements, whispers of kisses and caresses creeping up my spine. When I strode forward at his words I allowed myself only an instant of questioning, wondering if he could accept so much so quickly before taking him in my arms, kissing him with a deep and satiffyed moan.

Words were no longer needed. When I took his hand and led him up the stairs, to my room, he followed. When from the doorway I saw him thumbing the button of his trousers undone I did the same, wanting to be bare, exposed, lost in him. He tugged off his shirt with his trousers open to reveal the hem of pale blue pants as my own shirt dropped to the floor and we stood staring at each other for a moment. He'd bare his teeth if he could, an urgent savagery darkening the irises of his eyes.

I met him skin to skin, kissing those lips, those lush and tender lips, his hips rising in the straining fabric of his pants as his trousers hit the floor. I nuzzled my face into the scruff of his neck and held him tightly before reaching my arms down to pick him up. He was surprised for a moment, arms around my neck, feet dangling to my side. I strode to the bed and set him down, enveloping his body in my own. I wanted to take my time. Wanted to taste every inch of him. He stretched out, arms above his head, small gasping breaths signifying his arousal as my lips and hands explored every part of him. A small flick of my tongue and a sharp suck at his nipple made him groan and hips buck. Kissed every rib. Kissed down his flank into the warm, moist center of him, the hardness of him insistent and bursting from the damp fabric.

At his hips I glanced up at him and saw half lidded eyes and felt and smelled his longing swell and crest against mine. I pulled his pants off quickly, he kicked at them and when his cock was free it shone and glistened red and wet in the space in front of me. I kissed along a hip bone, enjoying the jump of his cock, the thundering pulse of his femoral artery at my lips and teeth. He moaned in frustration at the lack of contact and a hand dragged over my hair. I ignored it and pushed his legs apart, hands curving over the soft flesh of his inner thighs, lips following. He twitched and jerked and made small pleading sounds as I licked and devoured the richness of his body. I sat on my haunches, arching and thrusting my hips into the air as he writhed beneath me.

His eyes found mine and I waited for the moment of desperation before sliding my hands from his knees, up his thighs, spreading him wider until I lowered myself over his cock, giving him the first lick as my hands found his balls and the tight stretch of his perineum . The sound he made sent shivers down my spine, painful in my untouched cock. He nearly sobbed as my lips wrapped around the sweet dripping head of his cock. The combination of my hungry sucking and licking of his cock and the thrust of his hips forced his length down my throat. Yes, Will, yes, go deep. I released him long enough to raise a hand to my lips and dribble spit down several fingers, following the rise and fall of his hips as those fingers found his tight hot opening, wishing I could open him with my mouth as I devoured his cock. He shook and bucked against the intrusion, biting back long moans and gasped as the first finger extended and curled inside of him.

I released his cock with a wet pop and looked up to his face as I pushed a second finger inside of him, slowly reaching into the velvety heat and watching his jaw drop open, the rich droplets of precum sliding down his cock, begging to be licked up. Knuckles met the soft flesh of his ass I pumped inside of him, meeting the swell of his prostate with wicked purpose. When I positioned myself to take his cock in my mouth again he pulled at the loose tendrils of my hair and forced his eyes to mine, “Hannibal,” he said breathlessly, “Please,” my fingers thrust and curled inside of him making his head fall back again with a delicious groan, “Please. I want to feel you inside of me.”

My cock throbbed and wept at the words and I thought I’d drown at even the suggestion. He found my eyes again and I rose over him, fingers leaving him with a clenching urgency, capturing his wet mouth in a deep kiss, teeth catching at his swollen lower lip he’d worried to the point of blood. I reached for the bedside and found the lube. He stroked his cock in hapless, clumsy motions as I slathered my aching cock with lube, reaching to and into his entrance, fingers slipping on the hot flesh.

As I rested back on my heels, free from my own pants, his eyes found me, hungry over every bare inch of me. The heated gaze burned through me, his eyes wide at the sight of my cock fully erect in front of him, mouth open. I leaned forward, raising his hips and resting his knees to either side of my shoulders, cock in my hand, eyes closed at the moment of anticipation. I felt his lips find the side of my jaw, my throat, biting and sucking at my strangled heavy breaths. When the head of my cock met the wet pucker of his hole I gasped and rolled my forehead into his, our hair tangled in each other's mouth open in a gasping moment of pause as my hips jerked and made small thrusts forward, testing the tightness.

He groaned out a, “Yeessss,” and my cock pushed forward stretching into the opening with aching slowness. I gathered him in my arms, pulling the length of his thighs around me, my mouth meeting the crest of his throat, over the gasping sounds of need as the swollen head of my cock pushed into him, “Haaaannibal,” he whimpered. He tensed and shuttered and shook under me as I sucked at the flesh of his throat, wanting to sink into him ruthlessly, make him cry out.

“Oh, Will,” I breathed, the scent of our arousal driving me deeper, inch by inch, “Will,” I said again, loving the sound of his name against the whining pleads to be filled. He was so tight, so hot I thought I’d break. Yes Will, I thought as I slid further, his walls clamping and sucking me further, I’m yours, Will. Finally my hips met the flesh of his ass and I remained

still, breathing, pulsing inside of him as he panted. I found his mouth and kissed him tenderly, my pleasure rolling into ecstasy as his hips started to shift and meet the small thrusts of movement. Our bodies joined. Locked together. He might have said my name, shaking beautiful breaths as I pulled back, dragging my cock through the heat before thrusting back in, setting a rhythm he met and we moved, wet and perfect and curled into each other, his hands finding my ass and gripping me tight, pulling me harder into him. I grunted with each thrust, they became more forceful, sharp merciless thrusts forward, feeling every inch of him wrapped around me, our flesh smacking lewdy, as I found the part inside of him that made him cry and sob. I found his cock with my hand quickly, the heat rising. I needed this to last, wanted it to be an eternity, didn't want it to end, wanted to stay here forever.

"Hannibal," he panted, his cock swelling and jerking under my palm as I thrust into him, deep, to the hilt, faster, harder, "I'm going to cum, fuck, guh, uh, god."

"Yes," I moaned, "Yes, nuh, uh," he was wet and helpless in my hand as I rolled my hips, stealing a wet kiss as my movements became messy, jerky, the hot swell of my orgasm rising as I gasped into his open mouth, "Will, yes, I'm--"

"Fuck, Hannibal, fuck, I, please, ple--" I felt the pulse of his cock in my hand and my hips slammed into him, buried deep as he clamped and shuddered and cried out, his teeth finding my throat as hot spurts of cum hit my chest and my hands. Oh god, yes. My eyes squeezed shut as I swelled and exploded inside of him, tiny desperate thrusts of my hips drawing out each wave, each thick spill inside of him to the pounding of our hearts. His body was still jerking and shuddering as I milked his cock, each gasping cry of his proloning my own orgrasm till my eyes rolled back in my head.

When his body finally collapsed under me I moaned and fell onto him. We remained there, gasping for breath, chests heaving and slick with sweat for several minutes before he groaned and made a pleading sound for me to move. I pulled out of him with a sick wet pop and fell limp next to him. His legs hit the bed, shaking, and I rolled onto my back, spent.

When our breathing finally slowed I looked over to him and his eyes rolled over to mine, a dazed, open mouth grin on his face. I leaned forward to kiss him, joining our foreheads together, legs tangled together. Small kisses met my face, down my jaw, sniffs of nostrils and huffs of contented satiation, the moments humming and lengthening with golden perfection.

I rose, more shaky than I'd like to admit to get a towel from the bathroom. Running the warm cloth over him, and myself, I kissed his belly, his chest, and tiredly tossed the towel to the ground. He crawled under the covers and I pulled the extra blanket over us, gathering him in my arms. I buried my face in the nape of his neck and sighed at the contented warmth, feeling him sigh as well and relax under me. I liked to think I felt the moment he fell asleep, imagining the sound of a quiet stream, wind rising around us, making me hold him tighter.

Chapter End Notes

I haven't written many smut scenes with these two. I kept the talking to a minimum, liking the continued idea of their in tune-ness and showing rather than saying their affection. I believe this says more about me than anything, I'm not a words person when it comes to partners and at one point even shouted angrily "Saying I love you means fuck all!" to someone I loved because actions matter, words are full of shadows . . . alright enough of that, this is about the story after all. Thanks for reading!

Morning

Chapter Notes

> This is sort of part two of the last chapter (still Hannibal's POV), just a bit of soft cuddling and loveliness before the final chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s morning. We’re both lying on our sides, facing each other with the blanket tucked comfortably over our shoulders. Our chests rise and fall nearly in sync, somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, contented and in no hurry to be anywhere else.

“It's so quiet,” Will said, tucking himself tighter under the blanket and into his pillow, “No dogs jumping on me, no one fighting over a bone or a toy or tearing apart a shoe.”

I only hummed an affirmative response, arm wrapped around him to stroke the small of his back. His cold feet shifted closer to mine, seeking warmth.

“I don’t want to get up,” he said softly, eyes closed. He was beautiful. Incredibly beautiful. Dark long lashes fluttered over his large eyes before they connected unimpeded with mine, clear and breathtakingly quiet as a smile spread over his face. The arm he had resting comfortably on my hip pulled me closer as he said with a groan, “I’m never this comfortable in bed.”

“It’s perfect,” I said as I kissed his brow, lightly brushing our noses together. His hand slid up my body until it was hooked behind my ear, drawing our foreheads together with a sigh. Sleepy, feathery kisses on my lips as my eyes slid shut enjoying the gentle exploration, simple and pure.

We laid quietly for as long as we could, drifting almost back to sleep before his weight shifted and his legs stretched long to the end of the bed. When his eyes opened again it was with a reluctant but concerted effort to wake. He rolled to his back and arched his spine in a full bodied stretch. I rearranged my pillow and watched him happily, loving the flush over his face, the gentle curls of his hair tangled and messy over his brow. My smell was all over him.

“I have an appointment with Dr. Gachet today,” he said, throwing both arms over his head.

“Do you intend on seeing him?” I asked.

“I do,” he said, then thought for a moment, turning his head to look at me, as a hand reached to brush hair from my face, “I want him to come here tonight.”

“What are you thinking?” I asked, kissing his wrist as his hand stroked my face.

He shifted again to his stomach, close enough to kiss my lips and the light stubble on my chin before pulling back, the blue of his eyes even more beautiful than I could ever have imagined in the morning, “If I come to you, distraught and unstable, you’d have to call Dr. Gachet, tell him I will only speak to him.”

“And once he is here and you are not distraught or unstable?”

“I’ll end our therapeutic relationship,” he said simply, pulling back from light kisses up and down my jawline.

“It could work. I’m going to be spending most of the day preparing for our departure. You believe he would come?”

“He seems vested,” he said with certainty, gathering the pillow under his head with a sigh, “Think Abigail knows?”

“About Dr. Gachet or you and I?”

“Either.”

“I will tell her about Dr. Gachet,” I said, “Would you rather she didn’t know about us?”

“Yeh maybe, for now,” he said with a nod then frowned, “What about my dogs?”

“I’m sorry, Will, all six won’t be feasible.”

His face faltered, his lower lip catching in his teeth, “Two?”

“If the second is small.”

He looked uncertain, “Of all the choices I’ve had to make,” he laughed bitterly, “This is completely heartbreaking.”

I traced my hand over his bare back, watching the flex of my biceps, feeling the soreness and remembered gripping his hips tightly and dragging them toward me. Which made me smile. “I hope it’s Winston. I feel a bond with him.”

He turned his face and smiled, “Do you?”

“He is unique. Unlike the others. Intelligent. And he cares very much for you.”

“Buster was my first dog,” he said quietly, “He’s older, I want him with me.”

“He is welcome in our family then.”

He was lost in thought for a moment, “What about the body?”

“We’ll take that with us too,” I said.

He seemed to accept this with a calm surety. Our eyes met and I felt the strength of his conviction like the currents of a river. His quiet moments were rooted in nature, in the sound

of the wind through leaves and grasses, the smell of rich earth and decay; I felt humbled at the majesty and envious of its expanse. I imagined waking up every morning like this. His eyes shifted to focus on my face, then he frowned slightly, “I don’t know if I’ve ever seen you needing a shave.”

“I didn’t have time yesterday.”

“I guess I wasn’t overly observant.”

“Other things to be observant of.”

He nodded after a moment and then shifted into more decisive movements. One more kiss before he sat up with an aggravated moan and stood naked in the sunlight. When he saw me looking at him, at the compact, muscled frame and pleasing curve of his ass he flushed, hand dipping to scratch at the dark batch of fur around a semi hard cock, “Stop looking at me like that,” he said almost too coyly. All I wanted to do was push him back into the covers, kiss over every bare inch of flesh to make sure nothing had changed since the night before, “I’ll stop at home, pack a few things, go to work, see Gachet, then be back here with the dogs, okay?” He snapped on his pants and searched around for his trousers.

“You’re right,” I sighed and sat up, reluctantly, throwing my legs over the side of the bed to stand next to him. I wrapped my arms around him, not ready to let go, palms spreading down his back to the softness of his ass as I kissed him, “Say hello to the doctor for me.”

Will left after many hurried kisses and groping hands. Once he was fully clothed and I was still naked trying to find the spot on his neck that made him moan he pushed me back with a devilish quirk of his eyebrow and a smile and I was forced to accept that inevitable. We both needed to focus. It was a prudent choice. No matter the difficulty. No matter the sting of absence.

After putting on some clothes and a robe, I ventured downstairs. Abigail was sitting in the kitchen with juice and toast, reading a book with partial interest as I walked in.

“Good morning, Abigail,” I greeted.

“Mornin’,”

She watched me move to the coffee maker, thankfully automatic and already brewed, and when I settled at the opposite edge of the counter she tilted her head, “So how long have you and Will been,” she added a casual lilt to her voice but a less than subtle suggestive expression on her face countered its effect, “You know . . .”

“I’m not sure I do,” I said, deciding to play coy, taking the first invigorating sip of coffee, closing my eyes to feel the hot liquid warming my throat, bursting over my tongue with sharp flavours of chocolate and fruits.

“Were you two *not* kissing last night?”

And much more , I thought. How strange, the unbalanced innocence wherein violence and horror were disproportionately familiar to her while matters of love and intimacy were disproportionately unknown, “It was a very emotional reunion for him.”

“Come on!” she groaned, “It’s cute.”

“Cute?” What an inadequate word for Will. He is cute. But the totality of his appeal was far beyond the shapes of his ears or the blue of his eyes or the proportions of his body. Unbidden, too close to the surface, my mind traveled back to the sweet feel of his hips in my hands, the impossible unity and synchronicity as I thrust tightly into him. The vivid sensation caught me off guard and I marvelled somewhat at the carelessness while enjoying the sense memory.

Abigail was happily bouncing in her chair; I hated to dash her good spirits but nonetheless would honored Will’s wishes, “It’s private, Abigail.”

“I just want to know, you know, when we are in Europe, can I tell people you’re my . . . dads?”

“We will be your guardians.”

She seemed dissatisfied, but finished the rest of her juice and stood up, “You seem different, you know.”

“Different?” I asked, drinking more coffee, wondering at her perceptiveness gained by the time we’d spent together over the last months.

“Oh yeh,” she said, placing her plate in the sink and turning back to me, “It’s kinda like someone flipped your heart out onto the outside of your ribs.”

I frowned at the image, wondering if it were possible without severing arteries, “He means a great deal to me.”

“To me too.”

I smiled lightly and raised my chin, urged forward by the multitude of tasks to complete, “Now,” I said, deciding I may need a second cup of coffee, “I have a job for you today while I work on dismantling the basement.”

“Basement?”

“Where I do much of my work. It will need to be cleared. While I do that I want you to buy a car.”

“Seriously?” she asked excitedly.

“I have cash. And a particular car in mind. I’d like to offer you something more aesthetically pleasing but the intention is anonymity not luxury,” I handed her a piece of paper with details on a local car for sale.

She took it and her face screwed up, “1996? This car has over 200,000 miles on it.”

“The mighty Honda,” I said with confidence, “We will only have it so long as we need it and I believe it is up to task.”

“Okay,” she agreed, “I can do that. Secret identity protocol?”

“Especially. Baltimore can be a deceptively small town.”

“Got it,” she took the slip of paper and spun around, “Oh, and Dad?,” she grinned ear to ear, “Nice hair.”

I hadn’t checked in a mirror but reaching my hand to my head my hair was indeed a mess.

Chapter End Notes

My main justification for Abigail calling Hannibal Dad was indeed from the Hannibal Reunion. It was so wonderful and elicited a true squee from me. My goodness. Whelp, the last chapter will be a bit long and from Will's POV so stay tuned and thank you all for reading and commenting and helping me through this. See you at the end:)

Flight

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait, here is the last chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I felt oddly calm driving into work after feeding the dogs. Even my house in Wolf Trap, a place where I'd managed some sense of normality, stability, was just a thing, a thing that could be replaced or rebuilt. I valued it, the sense of *home* I'd created when the very concept was so alien to me. I had to give myself some credit for even making the initial attempt after a largely nomadic childhood. If I felt it once I could feel it again. And not alone. Despite the security my home had provided me it was nonetheless imbued with a listless loneliness and purposeful isolation. I didn't want that anymore. I'm tired of it. I want more.

The charged, restless energy of my body was quickening all my movements as I walked at a brisk pace to my office. For the first time in months it felt like I was moving toward something. It felt good. A solid weight has been lifted from my chest and I could finally take a full breath. I felt like I was suddenly back in my body, fully aware of it, every ache, every pain, every sensation, not just the constant throbbing at my temples and sour stomach. I felt stronger.

I knew without looking he'd bruised my hips. I hadn't *not* planned to stay the night last night. Had hoped. Hoped in the rain drenched, stranded at a darkened rest area on the side of the motorway kind of hope. Afraid of how much I felt like I needed it. Needed him. Felt like it oozed from me. Wasn't prepared for it.

Calling sex with Hannibal intense would be a sloppy understatement. He was different. It felt different. Physical intimacy is messy in general, an excess of fluids and flailing muscles, but for me, for me it borders on tumultuous. It's far too often obtrusive and uncomfortable and tragically one sided. Not with him. He didn't overwhelm me. Well, obviously he did. Fuck. But unlike the usual landslide of someone else's emotions wherein I invariably found myself hovering somewhere in the corner of the room I was actually there. And if I had to feel like I was the one being penetrated I might as well be.

And the craziest part was when I woke up next to him it wasn't just feelings I was picking up from him. It was images. And that was new. Images of me lying naked in a bed of black feathers and blood red flowers. Light shining through a stained glass window. Gossamer curtains caught in a warm mediterranean breeze opening to a golden field of olive trees. Bits of images of me from the night before, his hands spreading over my chest, the arch of my back. They projected so clearly from his mind. Maybe I'll tell him about it later. I'd sort of rushed out of there, casting aside visions of a Rockwelian family breakfast for the reality of

all I had to do today. We'd have more breakfasts together. All of us. Abigail and Hanibal and I.

Suddenly, "Beverly, sorry," I literally ran into her rounding a corner.

"God, where are you headed?"

"My office," I said, trying to make the tone marginally lighthearted.

"You're lucky I wasn't carrying hot coffee."

"Yep," I shifted. God she would be able to tell. I avoided eye contact. Just what she'd be able to tell I wasn't sure. That I'd had sex with Hannibal, that Abigail was alive, that we were going to run away, or that I intended to murder my therapist.

She hadn't moved, which made me chance a look up as she said, "Hey, you know I didn't mean to freak you out or anything the other night, Maybe I overstepped, but I really just wanted to hang out."

I nodded, "Okay. Yeh, I know," I squeezed my eyes shut, "It's not your fault. I was a little on edge already, nothing to do with you. I appreciated the company while it lasted."

"Are you . . " she regarded me with narrowed eyes, "Better now, I mean, I don't--"

"Much," I turned to look down the hall.

"Oh my god!"

"Hmm?" I looked back to her quickly.

"So you had *plans* the other night."

"What?"

"I think I have some makeup for that."

My hand shot to my neck, "Jesus," I felt myself flush.

"Come on," she took my arm and walked with me the rest of the way to my office. As I paced she looked through her purse, "Our skin tones don't exactly match but it's something, if you want it."

I thought about it. How much do I care? Not much at this point. Of course there was my appointment with Dr. Gachet. So yeh. Maybe. I took the makeup from her, "Thanks," I opened up the compact and used the small mirror to see a bruise blossoming right over my collar bone, near the hollow in my neck. It had the unmistakable shape of teeth. My brain quickly and every way that it is mistakenly and inconveniently efficient, pulled forth the memory of Hannibal's mouth there, the thrust of his hips and the length of his cock sliding deep inside of me. And just as fast and just as unhelpful my cock responded in kind,

hardening slightly at the memory, hearing the sound of his moans echo in my ears, the pulse of his cock as he came, making me shiver.

“Really, Will?” Beverly sighed impatiently as I dabbed ineffectually at my neck. She snatched it from my hand. God, how embarrassing, she’d probably recognize the bitemark, the finely honed tools of her trade. Not that Hannibal smiled much. I held still as she did far better than I could at covering up the multicoloured mark, “So,” she said lightly, not doing a great job at hiding her shit eating grin, “Was it fun?”

“It’s childish to show up at work with a hickey,” I said, avoiding the question.

“Tell that to whoever gave that to you,” she smiled, “It’s a beauty. They knew what they were doing.”

“He knew better,” I grumbled.

“Sure he did,” she said.

I cleared my throat, not sure anything would unravel whatever theory she had in her head, deciding instead to change the subject, “I am sorry about the other night. I hope I didn’t scare you.”

She clipped the compact shut, “I wasn’t scared. Just confused. If you’d had plans you could have just told me.”

“No, I hadn’t had plans. Not officially.”

“Unexpected?” she crossed her arms.

In truth, “Not really.”

“Well it looks good on you.”

“What does?”

“I’m not going to make you blush anymore by saying.”

“I appreciate that.”

“Well,” she nodded with a thoughtful head tilt, “Can barely notice it.”

“Good,”

She pushed a hand through her hair, an exasperated expression on her face,“I better get a move on, I have a meeting with Jack.”

“Just you?”

“Zeller has been less of a meeting kind of guy these days, so yeh.”

“No more hapless students?”

“Not since the last Ripper kill. Jack doesn’t trust anyone else on it.”

“Interesting.”

“What is?” I heard from my door to see Jack standing there.

Beverly and I both turned, feeling for a moment like students caught under the bleachers smoking. His face was expressionless, eyes rimmed in red, likely from lack of sleep.

“Jack, I was just coming to find you,” Beverly said, gathering her purse.

“Hello, Will,” Jack greeted.

“Jack,” I nodded.

He slid his hands into his pockets and shifted his broad shoulders, “I’m glad to run into you. I wanted to see you before you left.”

“Left?” glanced quickly to Beverly, confused at the jumble of emotions twisted around him. Impossible, he couldn’t know, “What are you talking about?”

“You haven’t--” he shifted uncomfortably and Beverly looked in shock at Jack, “You weren’t just meeting with Lewis?”

“No I wasn’t meeting with Lewis,” I spat, “Obviously you were.”

“I apologize, I thought you had.”

“Leave for where, Jack?”

“I’m sorry Will, you’re going to have to talk to him.”

“Where am I going, Jack?!”
He absorbed my anger like he had an iron core, a complete absence of an echo, unflinching, “It was my understanding that it was a decision you made together.”

“To what? Put me away *someplace* ?”

“He’s very well connected, he has associates at several top notch treatment facilities.”

“Will,” I hear Beveraly say and she’s put a hand on my arm. I’m fuming, raging, I can’t stand the sight of Jack right now. I want to tear him apart, want blood to pool in my mouth, want this all to be over. The physical contact draws me back and I look at Beverly who is staring at me with wide eyes and a pleading expression. Her concern and the sharp edge of her own shock and anger at Jack is enough for me to clamp my jaw together to the point of teeth splintering.

“Jack, what are you doing,” Beverly said with force, “One, you know how hard this has been on him, two, I’m in the room, and three it’s just shitty.”

“Excuse me?” Jack said, all of his attention shifting toward her now.

“Will’s done everything you told him to do since coming back. What he decides to do next is his own private business.”

Jack inhaled deeply, wide chest expanding as his eyes lowered. Beverly’s shoulders were squared, standing by what she said, standing by me.

“You’re right,” Jack finally said, allowing Beverly to relax, “I’m sorry, Will.”

I wasn’t going to say it was okay, say don’t worry about it. Not a chance. When Beverly removed her hand she asked quietly, “You okay?” I nodded and locked my eyes with her, hoping she knew how much I appreciated it, appreciated her. She looked to Jack, “I’ll meet you in your office.”

Jack left and I could finally unclench my fists.

“What was that about?” Beverly implored.

I shook my head, scrubbing my hands over my face, letting out a shuddering breath, “I’m not going to let them put me away again, Beverly.”

“Okay.”

“If I don’t see you again--”

“Wait, what? Will--”

“I just want you to know how grateful I am. That you’re my friend. Especially when it wasn’t easy.”

“I don’t understand,” her eyes pleaded for answers, answers I couldn't give her, “Will, you’re going to get reinstated, I know it.”

“No, I’m not,” I said, “Sometimes you just can’t go home again.”

“Okay, Dorthy,” she tried to joke and when I didn’t smile her expression fell again, “Will, I don’t want you to leave, not like this.”

“I’m ok, really,” I nodded, trying a smile, “You better go to him. Careful for a delayed bite response.”

“He deserved it,” she muttered then reached and took my hand, pausing a moment, “Whatever is going on, you’ll figure it out, I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, agreeing not because it was true but because it was a nice thought.

She left and I raised a shaky wrist to look at my watch. Dr. Gachet would be here in a moment.

>>>>>

“Will, how are you today,” Dr. Gachet asked, placing his notebook on his knee and uncapping his pen.

“Fine, okay,” I nodded, dragging a hand through my hair with a protracted sigh.

“Are you sure?” his head tilted, “You seem unsettled.”

“Well, I just ran into Beverly. Literally.”

“Beverly . . .”

“She works here. We worked together.”

“Is she a friend?”

“Tries to be.”

“Good,” he said, “That’s good to hear, Will.”

I shifted in my chair but said nothing, letting my eyes wander around my office, lingering on shadows, avoiding his gaze.

“We’re nearing the end of our sessions together, I’m curious how this experience has been for you and where you think you want to go from here.”

“I’m not sure. I’ve been trying to figure that out,” I said slowly as if the words were causing me to get choked up. Not giving him any indication that I’d run into Jack. That my privacy was apparently of no concern to them.

“What do you mean by that?”

I looked up at him, at his patient, motionless body watching my every movement, waiting for the words to rise from the murk of the swamp. I inhaled deeply and said in a slow, stuttering way, “Every time I’ve run into anyone since getting out, like Beverly, it’s harder and harder to be around them. Knowing that they know. That everyone knows. I’ve tried. You’ve seen it,” I looked up at him, finally meeting his eyes, “But I haven’t been able to go back to the way it was.”

“The way it was. The way it was when you were working with the FBI on cases?”

“Yes.”

“When you were getting in the heads of serial killers. Experiencing violent dreams. Fantasies. Delusions. You want to get back there?”

“When I had a purpose. A reason to be here.”

“You feel like you don’t have a reason to be here?”

“When I was younger, when this first started to happen, I didn’t know why,” I stopped, tears welling in my eyes, “But at least here, doing this, I can use it. There’s a reason for it, a reason for the struggle.”

“You still could use it. Your gift for empathy can still be utilized, Will. You could use it differently. Couldn’t you use not to affirm death; but to affirm life.”

I considered this, hating the strict black and white of the argument, as if life and death were ever separate things. I looked to the ceiling and in a bitter tone said, “Life is only affirmed in small, fleeting, blink and you’ll miss it sorts of ways. Darkness drags you head over heels into the abyss with reckless abandon.”

“Think back. Think back to a time when you felt life, the good parts of being alive, happiness, friendship, love, can you think of those now?”

“My dogs,” I said feebly. Every time I’d rescued one. Fishing. Beverly. Hannibal.

“Good. Hold onto that feeling, Will. It may be more elusive than the negative, less obvious, but it’s a part of you, it’s there, hold onto it.”

I felt a tear slide down my face as I met his gaze finally, “I intend to,” I said.

“We all need help. All of us. If you could do it alone, you would have, right?”

“Maybe I do need help,” I said slowly, “Maybe it’s better,” I bit at my lower lip, “Maybe it’s better than hurting people.”

His chin raised and the barest hint of actual emotion, like fear, plucked at my awareness. That fear was a spark, a calling to the part of me that wanted to tear to bloody shards the self-righteous imperialist declaration of sickness and deformity this man had placed upon me. I am not a sick, gross thing that needs to be castrated and bleached into banality.

“You feel as if you might hurt someone, Will?”

I smiled a pained smile, the rush of emotion heating my checks as I imagined my hands crushing his windpipe as sputtering gasps leave his mouth, and closed my eyes, “I know I will.”

“Who will you hurt?”

“I don’t know,” I said shakily and covered my face with my hands, as far as he knew, overwhelmed by emotion.

“Hannibal?”

At his name I felt my throat clench, “Hannibal?”

“Do you fantasize about hurting him?”

“Why do ask that?”

“He failed you. As a therapist. As a friend,” he tried to seek out my gaze, lips pressed together, “You haven’t mentioned him much. I know you’ve seen him.”

“How would you know that?”

He paused, inhaling with stuff consideration, “You’re no longer suspicious of him?”

“Are you trying to create a problem where there isn’t one?”

“Isn’t there one?”

“No,” I bit my lip, finding it hard to take a breath, “And killing him wouldn’t change what happened.”

“And what happened? In your eyes? Looking back, what happened?”

I let him wait, closing my eyes, “He gave me a reason to shine a light into rooms in my mind I was too scared to look into.”

He licked his lips, nearly salivating, exhilarated in a way that made me sick, “And what did you see?”

“The truth.”

“Which is?”

I wouldn’t give him this, the last stone, the teeth on the saw, I pulled it all closer to me, all I’d experienced, felt, loved, in the last few weeks and exhaled with purpose, locking my eyes with his, “I’m the mongoose hiding under the porch when the snake slithers by.”

He frowned, a second, stronger spark of fear and doubt breaking through his composure. His face twitched and I couldn’t help but remember when I was sixteen that the same look was on that counselor’s face when she’d reached for the phone, “Can I make some calls for you? Would you let me help you take the next step?”

I nodded slowly.

“Good,” he broke eye contact, “ I’m relieved to hear that, Will.”

I knitted my brow together, hunched my shoulders and wiped at a tear. As he looked at me with a mixture of relief and concern I took a moment to consider my prey. He may have been formidable in his youth. Bones grown long and thick through strenuous exercise, grueling four am practice and an authoritarian father. He may have the spirit but his older body, warped by years of disuse, even if defending its life, will be vulnerable to a stronger predator. His strength, when he had it, was in his upper body, legs reduced to thin stakes, easily off balance, “Can I call you tomorrow? Another day to think about it? Spend some time with my dogs?”

“Yes,” he said cautiously, the cogs in his head turning, no doubt considering liability if I were to unhinge myself before I was safely behind bars again, “You will call me tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” I said, watching him leave the room now hued in red and black tones, dripping and longing for release.

>>>>>

“Winston,” I said, rearranging the blanket in the back seat of my car where Buster was already lying, “Come on, time to go,”

Winston whined, ears back, looking over his shoulder to the house where several of the other dogs could be seen standing in the windows. His back legs were shaking as he looked back to me. Buster responded to Winston’s protests by licking my hand and groaning with impatience. His hips always hurt in the cold weather. Even with the car’s heat on he was probably cold. Did I remember his sweater?

“I know it’s scary, Winston,” I said, moving to kneel next to him, “I know you want everyone to come with but we can’t. I need you with me, buddy,” I rubbed at his ears, trying to pour into him all the reassurance and strength I could, “It’s going to be a change. It’s going to be scary. But the fearless are never brave, right? And when we find a home we’ll all be there together,” I leaned in to kiss his head and he licked at my ear. This was agonizingly difficult. I purposely kept my eyes from the house, knew that Beverly would take care of the dogs for me. I had already said my goodbyes. Tears were hot in my eyes as I stood again and tapped the top of the car, “Come on.”

Winston finally jumped into the car and settled down next to Buster. I got behind the wheel, one bag packed with the bare necessities, clothes, a few books, a few collapsible fishing rods and lures and Winston and Buster’s favourite toys next to me on the passenger seat.

I pulled out of the driveway and didn’t look back, too choked up to even try, my next words coming broken and thick with sadness as I said to the backseat, “We’re going to Hannibal’s. You’ll meet Abigail. She’s very important to me. And she’s excited to meet you. We’ll go on walks together wherever we end up and Hannibal is going to cook you the fanciest food. Buster you could live to be one hundred.”

I talked with them most of the ride there until I heard Buster snoring and Winston was happily looking out the window, tongue lolling from his mouth. When I pulled up to Hannibals I took a moment, looking in the back seat, “When we go inside don’t pee anywhere, okay?”

To be safe, after I shouldered my bag I let them both relieve themselves and didn’t knock before opening Hannibal’s front door, announcing, “Hannibal, we’re here!”

Before I could even set my bags down Abigail came running into the foyer, “You’re here, oh my goodness, hi!” she fell to her knees and Buster waddled over to her, accepting some very enthusiastic pets enough to make his tongue fall out the side of his mouth and the little nub of his tail to wag furiously back and forth, “Who’s this?” she asked.

“That’s Buster,” I said and looked to Winston who was sitting at my side, my hand on his head, “And this is Winston.”

“Hi Buster,” Abigail said as Buster clumsily tried to jump and lick her face which made her laugh, then excitedly went clicking around the hard floor, sniffing and exploring.

Abigail sat back on her heels, “And hi, Winston,” she correctly didn’t lunge for him or try and pet him if he didn’t want it, just smiled at him, “He’s nervous?” she asked looking up at me.

“Yeh, a little.”

“Me too,” she stood, tugging the sleeves of her jumper over her hands, then brightened slightly, “But hey I bought a car today!”

“Really?”

“A gorgeous 1996 Honda Accord wagon,” she winked.

“Wow, I bet it drives like a dream.”

“I’m not the best at driving a manual but I figure I will have time to get better. At least till we ditch it.”

Buster came back to her to ask for more pets and I left them together to find Hannibal. Setting my bags down in the living room Winston followed, head lowered to sniff around the new space. When I saw his tail start to wag I looked up and saw Hannibal coming from the kitchen.

“Hello Will,” he said, then looking down, “Winston,” he petted Winston who had gone to stand at his feet. I closed the distance between us and accepted a hug from him. Maybe didn’t know how much I needed it till I leaned hard into the solid mass of his body, arms wrapping tight around him, the sadness of leaving my dogs hitting me suddenly and mercilessly. He rubbed my back and said into my ear, “I know it was hard to just take two,” and I nodded into his shoulder, taking a moment before pulling back to look at him.

Holy shit he was wearing a t-shirt. Had I ever seen him in just a t-shirt? The light grey shirt was far from one you’d find in a Hanes pack of ten, it was soft and fitted and the sight of his bare arms was enough to make my mouth drop open, which only seemed to please him. Almost instinctively I reached for his jaw and pressed my lips to his, inhaling his scent, more musty and earthy than normal, his sweat, sharpened by the chemical smell of cleaning products and the faint smell of smoke.

“You’ve been busy,” I said next to his lips which he caught again in his own, warmly deepening the kiss with a sigh of contentment. My hands moved to the small of his back, enjoying the line of his spine and the divide of muscle under my palms.

“Ah-hem, just Buster and me, coming through, don’t let us interrupt,” I heard and Abigail walked by us with a huge smile on her face. Buster followed close behind to the kitchen.

Hannibal looked to me with an amused expression, “She is very intuitive. Figured it out this morning.”

“Ah,” I said, sliding my hands around to the broad plane of his chest, only covered with the thin fabric of his shirt, looking up into his eyes with an accepting yet slightly embarrassed expression, struck suddenly by the absurdity, “I can’t help but think of the Munsters,” I smiled, stepping back to avoid touching and distracting myself further as he looked confused by the reference, “We are the strangest family on Mockingbird Lane,” I shrugged at the confession, “I loved the reruns when I was a kid,” I watched Winston move away from us, wandering through the house with curiosity, “You don’t mind?”

“No,” Hannibal glanced after the fluffy tail, “Let him explore. Change is difficult for animals.”

“It is,” I said with a sigh, “Is everything ready?”

“Everything is ready.”

“It’s almost sundown. Then you can call him. Our appointment went as I’d planned today. Not to mention Jack was more than ready to sign me over to some wayward asylum somewhere.”

“You’ve removed yourself from that narrative. Free from their plan for you.”

“Yeh, Denmark sounds pretty good right about now.”

“Come,” Hannibal said, “I’ve put together a small meal. It will help authenticate your rude interruption on my quiet evening,”

We went to the kitchen where Abigail was sitting at the island pretending that she wasn’t giving Buster pieces of sausage from her pasta.

“You’re packed?” Hannibal asked her.

“I don’t have much,” she countered, then nodded, “But yeh, bag’s in the car.”

“Abigail,” I said, “When Dr. Gachet gets here.”

“Yeh, Hannibal told me,” she looked down, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear, response hovering on the unspoken word *murder* , “It’s okay,” she said unsteadily, “I just want to get out of here.”

Hannibal pushed a bowl of pasta in front of me and I stared at it for a moment, stomach turning, all the emotions of the day rising in a choking nausea. Maybe to Hannibal it was just maths; energy needed for murder, nothing more. But the space where my intent resided felt full already and on the verge of spilling over.

I looked at Abigail, “We’re all starting over. And we accept you just the way you are, Abigail.”

“I know,” she said with a small smile.

I ate a few mouthfuls of food, noting that Hannibal wasn't eating and was washing and putting away Abigail dish, already thinking moves ahead to when they will find the scene with just one bowl of food, not two, negating the question of who the second person was for the investigators when they came.

Hannibal moved over to take the phone from the receiver and I shot him a questioning look, "Would you rather I waited?" he asked.

"No," I shook my head, needing it to be done, needing it to happen, "Definitely not."

Hannibal dialed and waited with the phone to his ear, "Yes, Dr. Gachet, this is Hannibal Lecter," a pause while the other man spoke, "Will Graham is at my house. I wouldn't disrupt your evening but he is insisting on speaking with you and is very dysregulated," he listened more, "About twenty minutes ago. Yes he drove. No he isn't armed," Hannibal looked to me, "Do you want to speak to Dr. Gachet over the phone, Will?" I shook my head, "No, I'm afraid he's refusing. He wants to speak with you in person," Hannibal paused as if listening to me, "About being hospitalized. He's telling me he is ready to take the next step but needs your guidance," after a moment he said calmly, "I feel no need to call the police, their intervention could be more harmful than helpful in this case" he nodded, "Alright, I will keep him as calm as I can until you arrive. I apologize for the disturbance, Doctor."

Hannibal hung up, "Abigail, please take my bags and Will's to the car. Then take the dogs and we'll meet you there."

Abigail stood and did as she was told, leaving Hannibal and I in the kitchen. Somehow the thought of her seeing me kill someone was more palatable than seeing me act like a raving lunatic. When the doctor got here I'd act the part, just as I'd worked over in my mind over and over, full of gnawing teeth marks and tongue smoothed details wherein the weak, sick man he'd groomed into a mewling thing became something totally unrecognizable and far from defenseless.

Hannibal reached for a jacket he had draped over a chair. It was navy, almost a canvas material, sporty, no lapels just snap buttons. Despite the dissonance it suited him, especially when his hair was loose and falling over his face.

He spotted me looking at him, "Are you alright?"

"I feel nauseous," I said pushing the bowl away, "I feel like I'm stepping outside after a storm when the air is still thick and the sky is a funny green colour," I met his firm, certain gaze, " Looking for what's changed, what's displaced,"

He moved to stand in front of me and said, "All the same, familiar things rearranged into something new. And beautiful."

I stood and trailed my hand over his jaw, loving the way he leaned into my touch, the soft flutter of his eyes as I pulled him to me, letting the sharp bone to bone of our hips make both our pulses jump.

The phone rang again suddenly and I shot a questioning look at Hannibal.

He seemed far calmer than me as he picked up the phone before I could even vigorously shake my head no, “Hello?” after a moment he looked at me, “Yes, one moment,” reached the phone out to me, “It’s Ms. Katz.”

What? How? I took the phone, raising it to my ear, “Beverly?”

“Will,” her voice was hushed, almost at a whisper, “I don’t know what’s going on,” she sounded out of breath, “I only heard bits and pieces but something is going on, something big.”

“What?” the moment swelled and crashed into me, rocking me backwards.

“They know, Will,” she said clearly into the phone, “Whatever you and Hannibal are doing they know. Please. Whatever it is, *don’t* ,” I said nothing, Hannibal's concerned eyes found mine while Beverly’s pleaded, “Will, what are you going to do? What’s going on?”

I didn’t answer, couldn’t answer, only looked at Hannibal and said out loud, “They know.”

There was a pause and I heard her trying to catch her breath, the silence like the tethers on a boat straining against a rising tide, “Will,” she said, voice back to a whisper, “Just run.”

I hung up the phone.

“Fuck,” I said, chest heaving, “Fuck. This was all planned,” I started to pace in his kitchen, “Jack. God damn Lewis Gachet. They planned all of it,” my thoughts raced, all of it caught up to me in a horribly clarifying moment that shook like glass around me. I looked up to Hannibal, “To catch you.”

Hannibal only considered for a moment, the line of his jaw tightening, “Jack knows that I would do anything to protect you.”

“I’m your weakness,” I said, voice cracking.

“My blind spot,” he said in a low voice, his own fury rising like a storm around us, “He would exploit my feeling for you in his quest to catch the Ripper.”

“He may never get the chance again. He did everything he could to push me over the edge, knowing I’d come to you, knowing how scared I’d be,” he looked at me finally, his eyes suddenly darker, “Hannibal, I’m sorry.”

His face faltered for a second, then another, “He thought I’d kill the doctor to keep you safe,” he inhaled, almost shakily, “Jack’s laid a trap for me. For us. He’s intuited my feelings for you,” he smiled slightly, “Clever.”

“I’m going to kill him,” I said, the rage settling hot in my chest. Jack and Dr. Gachet working together, all this time, to get closer to Hannibal. Using me. Every session we’d had geared toward making me doubt my sanity, making me the poor sick puppy that Hannibal would do anything to protect. Playing into every insecurity I had.

And because they were so close to the surface, all the memories that Dr. Gachet had poked and prodded, I was sent back to a flickering fluorescent light in a small room with bars on the windows. My dad had brought me some of my favourite books to read while they held me and they had said no, said they would further compromise my grasp on reality. He'd come to sit on my bed and though it's a haze of fear and too many medications I remember he held me. He pulled me into a hug so tight it crushed my ribs and I was barely able to understand why, lost in the fog, in the madness, not able to understand what was happening, why he was so upset. Brief, gasping memories of him at the nurses station shouting at the doctors telling them that they wouldn't take his son away, that taking him away from the only family that he had was ridiculous and he didn't care what they said. He fought for me. Fought for me when I couldn't. He'd taken me from that place and then we'd left. He'd left. Piece by piece. He'd disappeared leaving a grey lifeless body behind. Booze hadn't helped, losing one job and then another hadn't helped, a son with an illness he didn't understand hadn't helped. He was just gone. My awareness of him fell away until there was just a nullifying black void, dense, endless, freezing, where my dad had been. And it was my fault.

"We're ready to leave," I heard and barely felt a hand on my shoulder, "Let's go. Now."

"No," I said, shaking my head, eyes closed, "I can't." Not after what he'd done. Not after I'd tried so hard, not after my dad had fought so hard, not when I finally had the chance to fight.

Hannibal stopped me, shaking me loose from the memories, "I don't care," he grasped my shoulders and drew my gaze, "I don't care about Dr. Gachet," his eyes were filled with a sudden hopeful excitement, "Let Jack find an empty house, a trail run cold," he raised a hand to my face, "Killing the doctor will not heal the wounds deep inside you. Allowing me to love you may," I looked into his eyes. Love? He kissed me quickly and took my hand.

I held onto him, onto the steady beat of his heart, asking, "You don't want to kill him?"

"I want to bury the past, I want the memories to enrich the soil wherein our future will grow from lives past, tragedies weathered," he lowered his eyes and I felt his emotions quake through us both, "I never would have seen myself at this precipice, never thought myself capable, or fortunate enough to find it but," he looked back up into my eyes as I thought I heard the sound of a car door from outside, "I am no longer alone. Neither are you. Nor Abigail. And nothing is worth the ruin of that dream."

I squeezed his hand and drew his face to mine, saying breathless over his lips, "I'm yours, Hannibal," I kissed him, "Always."

We flew from the back door. Abigail was waiting in the back seat with the dogs in the back of the wagon. I reached for his hand again as he shifted the stubborn transmission of the Honda into second, third gear, leaving Baltimore, Jack, Dr. Gachet behind. He pulled my hands to his lips and kissed my knuckles as I looked into the back seat to Abigail, Winston, and Buster. All I needed. We were headed South and if that was the only thing I knew for sure I didn't care. Because Abigail smiled with Buster in her lap. Winston wagged his tail. And Hannibal loved me.

Chapter End Notes

This was difficult to end! All the love and praise to the people out there writing canon divergent fics but I muddied by feet, so to speak, and think it's out of my system. I loved writing this and loved sharing it. Will I write a continuation some day? Mayhaps. We will see. I do have another story in mind already, something a bit more silly and maybe a little freaky . . . again, thank you all for following me in this, it was a giant to me. I hope the twist made sense . . . Jack is clever afterall and Bev was caught in the middle of a very strange situation . . . also, as I said, Winston is key in all things ;)

End Notes

This actually happened to me, early in lock down, my furry friend fell ill and was near death due to ingesting some sort of toxin. They pulled through put it was very scary. And because I'm not cruel I will let you know Winston will be alright. Additionaly, during my yearly rewatch of American Werewolf in London I noticed that the dog of the three tramps killed was named Winston. I think Bryan grabbed Winston's name from that classic horror film, which, yes, probably everyone knew already but was chuffed to figure it out myself.

Also, dear readers, I know the layout of Will's house isn't clear. Take it as part of the canon divergence when he has a kitchen and a bedroom on the main floor and it all lines up. Apologies for any confusion there.

Please let me know what you think, I appreciate and love all comments. They will keep me going while I edit some of the final chapters.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!